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SELECTED STORIES

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CONTENTS

STORIES

	Page
Makar Chudra. <i>Translated by B. Isaacs</i>	9
Old Izergil. <i>Translated by J. Fineberg</i>	24
Chelkash. <i>Translated by J. Fineberg</i>	50
Afloat. <i>Translated by B. Isaacs</i>	89
The Break-Up <i>Translated by R. Prokofieva</i>	10
The Philanderer. <i>Translated by J. Fineberg</i>	13
A Droll Story. <i>Translated by J. Fineberg</i>	14
Twenty-Six Men And A Girl <i>Translated by B. Isaacs</i>	18





MAKAR CHUDRA

A cold wet wind blew from the sea, wafting over the steppes the pensive melody of the splashing surf and the rustle of shrubbery on the beach. Now and then its gusts brought shrivelled yellow leaves and whirled them into the flickering flames of the campfire. The gloom of autumnal night around us quivered and receded apprehensively, disclosing for a brief moment the endless steppe on the left, the boundless sea on the right, and opposite me the figure of Makar Chudra, the old Gypsy, who was looking after the horses of his Gypsy camp pitched within fifty paces of where we sat.

Heedless of the cold blasts that blew open his Caucasian coat and mercilessly buffeted his bared hairy chest, he reclined in a graceful vigorous pose with his face towards me, drawing methodically at his huge pipe, emitting thick puffs of smoke through his mouth and nose, staring out over my head into the deathly hushed darkness of the steppes, talking incessantly and making not a single movement to shield himself from the cruel gusts of wind.

"So you're on the tramp? That's fine! You've made a splendid choice, my lad. That's the way: trot around and see things, and when you've seen all you want, lie down and die—that's all!"

"Life? Other people?" he went on, having lent a sceptical ear to my protest about his "that's all" "H'm Why should that worry you? Aren't you Life? Other people live without you and'll live their lives without you. Do you imagine anybody needs you? You're neither bread nor a stick, and nobody wants you!"

"To learn and teach, you say? But can you learn how to make people happy? No, you cannot. You get grey hairs first before talking about teaching. Teach what? Every one

knows what he wants. Those that are cleverer take what there is to take, the sillier ones get nothing, but every man learns himself."

"They're a curious lot, those people of yours All herded together and treading on each other's toes when there's so much room in the world," he waved a sweeping hand towards the steppes. "And toiling away all the time. What for? Whom for? Nobody knows. You see a fellow ploughing, and think—there he is sweating out his strength drop by drop on that land, then he'll lie down in it and rot away. He leaves nothing after him, he sees nothing from that field of his and dies as he was born—a fool."

"D'you mean to say he was born to dig the earth and die without having managed to dig a grave for himself? Does he know what freedom is? Has he any idea of the vast and glorious steppe? Does the music of the steppe gladden his heart? He's a slave, from the moment he is born, a slave all his life long, and that's all! What can he do for himself? All he can do is to hang himself, if he learned a little sense."

"Now look at me; at fifty-eight I've seen so much that if you'd write it down on paper it would fill a thousand bags like the one you've got there. You just ask me what places I haven't been to? There aren't such places. You've got no idea of the places I've been to. That's the way to live—gad about the world, and that's all! Don't stay long in one place—it's not worth it! Like day and night that chase each other around the world, you keep chasing yourself away from thoughts of life, so as not to grow sick of it. Once you stop to think you'll get sick of life—that's how it always happens. It happened to me too. Humph! So it did, my lad."

"I was in prison, in' Galicia. What am I living on this earth for?—I started to mope, feeling sort of dreary—it's dreary in prison, my lad, ever so dreary! And I felt sick at heart when I looked out of the window at the fields, so sick as though some one were gripping and wrenching my heart. Who can say what he lives for? No one can say it, my lad!"

And it's no use asking yourself about it L.ve, and that's all Go about and look around, and you'll never be bored I very nearly hung myself by my belt that time, that's a fact!"

"Huh! I spoke to a man once He was a serious man, one of yours, a Russian You must live, he says, not the way you want, but according to the word of God. Obey the Lord and he will give you everything you ask for He himself was all in rags and holes I told him to ask God for a new suit of clothes He fell into a rage and drove me away, cursing. And he'd just been telling me that one should forgive and love his fellow creatures He might have forgiven me if what I said offended his lordship There's a teacher for you! They teach you to eat less, while they themselves eat ten times a day "

He spat into the fire and fell silent, while refilling his pipe The wind moaned plaintively and softly, the horses whinnied in the darkness, and the tender passionate strains of the *churka* melody floated up from the Gypsy camp The beautiful Nonka, Makar's daughter was singing I knew that deep throaty-toned voice of hers, that always sounded so strange, discontented and imperious, whether she sang a song or said "good day" The warm pallor of her dark-skinned face was fixed in a look of queenly hauteur, and the deep pools of her dark brown eyes shone with a realization of her own irresistible loveliness and disdain for everything that was not she

Makar held out his pipe

"Take a smoke! She sings well, that lass, eh? I should say so! Would you like a girl like that to love you? No? That's right! Never believe girls, and keep away from them. Girls find kissing better and more pleasant than I do smoking a pipe, but once you've kissed her say good-bye to your liberty She'll bind you to her by invisible strings which you'll never be able to break and you'll lay your soul at her feet. That's a fact! Beware of the girls! They're all liars! She'll say she loves you more'n anything in the world, but you just prick her with a pin and she'll break your heart I know a lot about their kind, I do! Well, my

lad, d'you want me to tell you a story, a true story? Try to remember it if you can, and it's a free bird you'll be all your life."

"Once upon a time there was a young Gypsy, a young Gypsy named Loiko Zobar. All Hungary and Bohemia and Slavonia and all around the sea everybody knew him—he was a fine lad! There wasn't a village in those parts, but where a half -dozen or so of the inhabitants didn't swear to God they'd kill him. But Loiko went on living, and if he took a fancy to a horse, Zobar'd be curveting about on that horse even if you was to put a regiment of soldiers to guard it! Ah! He wasn't afraid of anybody, not likely! Why, if the prince of devils with all his pack came to him, he'd as likely as not stick a knife in him, and he'd certainly curse him roundly and send the whole pack off with a flea in its ear—you can take that from me!"

"And all the Gypsy camps knew him or had heard of him. All he loved was horses, and nothing more, and even then not for long—he'd ride 'em a bit then sell 'em, and the money was anybody's for the asking. He had nothing that he cherished—if you wanted his heart he'd tear it out of his breast and give it to you, as long as it made you happy. That's the kind he was, my lad!"

"Our caravan was wandering at the time through Bukowina—that was about ten years ago. Once, on a night in spring, we were sitting around—myself, the old soldier Danilo who fought under Kossuth, and old Noor and all the others and Radda, Danilo's daughter."

"You know my girl Nonka, don't you? A beautiful maid she is! Well, you couldn't compare her to Radda—too great an honour! There aren't any words to describe that girl Radda. Maybe her beauty could be played on the violin, and even then only by a person who knew that violin as well as he did his own soul!"

"She seared the hearts of many a fine lad she did, aye, many a fine lad! In Morava a magnate, an old, shock-headed man saw her and was struck all of a heap. Sat on his horse

and stared, shivering as with the ague. He was pranked out like the devil on a holiday, in a rich Ukrainian coat embroidered with gold, and the sword at his side all set in precious stones flashed like lightning whenever his horse stamped its foot, and the blue velvet of his cap was like a bit of sky—he was a big lord, that old gent! He stared and stared, then he says to Radda: 'Hi, give me a kiss, I'll give you my purse!' She just turned away without a word! 'Forgive me if I've offended you, can't you look at me more kindly?' said the old magnate, immediately coming down a peg, and he threw a purse at her feet—a fat purse, brother! And she spurned it in the dust, casual like, with her foot, and that's all."

"Ah, what a maid!" he groaned, and flicked his horse with his riding crop and was gone in a cloud of dust.

"The next day he came again 'Who's her father?' he went thundering about the camp Danilo stepped out 'Sell me your daughter, take whatever you want!' And Danilo, he says: 'Only the nobility sell everything from their pigs to their conscience, but I fought under Kossuth, and don't traffic in anything!' The other became furious, made a snatch for his sword, but one of the boys stuck a lighted tinder in the horse's ear and he made off with his rider in a flash We struck tents and moved off We hadn't been travelling two days when up he dashes again! 'Hi, you,' he says, 'before God and you my conscience is clear, give that maid to me in marriage I'll share all I have with you, I'm mighty rich!' He was all on fire and swaying in the saddle like feather-grass in the wind That set us all thinking"

"Well daughter, what do you say?" Danilo muttered under his moustache.

"What would the eagle be if she went into the crow's nest of her own free will?" Radda asked us.

Danilo laughed, and so did we all

"Well said, daughter! Hear that, Sir? Nothing doing! Look among the doves—they're more docile." And we moved on

“That gentleman seized his cap, threw it to the ground and galloped away so furiously that the very earth shook. That's the kind of girl Radda was, my lad!”

“Yes! Well, one night as we sat around we heard music floating over the steppe. Fine music! It set your blood on fire and lured you into the unknown. That music, we all felt, made one yearn for something after which, if you got it, life would no longer be worth living, unless it was, as kings over all the earth, my lad!”

“Well, a horse loomed out of the darkness, and on the horse a man sat and played as he approached us. He drew up at the campfire, ceased playing and smiled down at us.”

“Ah, why, that's you, Zobar!” Danilo cried out to him joyfully. Yes, that was Loiko Zobar!

“His moustaches lay on his shoulders and mingled with his locks, his eyes were as bright as stars and his smile was like the sun so help me God! He and his horse might have been forged of a single piece of iron. There he stood red as blood in the firelight, his teeth flashing in a smile! Damned if I didn't love him then more than I loved myself, even before he had spoken a word to me or had as much as noticed my existence!”

“Yes, my lad, that's the kind of man he was! He'd look into your eyes and captivate your soul, and you wouldn't be the least bit ashamed of it, only feel proud about it. With a man like that you feel nobler yourself. Such men are rare, my friend! Perhaps that's better so. If there'd be too much of a good thing in this world, it wouldn't be looked on as a good thing. Aye! Well, let's get on with the story.”

“Radda she says: 'You play well, Loiko! Who made you such a sweet-toned delicate fiddle?' He laughed—I made it myself! And I made it not of wood, but from the breast of a young girl whom I loved dearly, and the strings I play on are her heartstrings. The fiddle plays a little false, but I know how to handle the bow!”

“Our breed, you know, tries straight away to befog a

girl's eyes, so they be dimmed with sad yearning for a fellow without kindling his own heart. That was Loiko's way too. But Radda was not to be caught that way. She turned away with a yawn and said: 'And people said Zobar was clever and adroit—what liars! With that she walked away'

"Oho, pretty maid, you've got sharp teeth!" said Loiko with a flashing eye, getting off his horse. "How do you do, brothers! Well, here I am come to you"

"Welcome guest!" said Danilo in reply. We kissed, had a talk and went to bed. We slept soundly. In the morning we saw that Zobar's head was tied up with a rag. What's that? Oh, his horse accidentally hurt him with its hoof while he was asleep

"Ha-a! We guessed who that horse was and smiled into our moustaches, and Danilo smiled too. Well, wasn't Loiko worthy of Radda? I should think so! However fair a maid may be, she has a narrow, petty soul, and though you'd hang a pood of gold round her neck she'd never be any better than she was. Well anyway!"

"We lived a pretty long time on that spot, things were going well with us and Zobar was with us. That was a comrade for you! Wise like an old man, informed on everything and knew how to read and write Russian and Magyar. When he'd start speaking you'd forget about sleep and could listen to him for ages! As for playing—we'll salt my hide if there's another man in the world could play like that! He'd draw his bow across the strings and your heart'd begin to flutter, then he'd draw it again and it'd stop beating while you listened, and he just played and smiled. You felt like crying and laughing one and the same time when listening to him. Now you'd hear some one moaning bitterly, pleading for help and lacerating your heart as with a knife; now the steppe telling the heavens a fairy tale, a sad tale; now a maid weeping, bidding farewell to her beloved! And now a valiant youth calling his beloved to the steppe. Then suddenly—heigh-ho! A brave merry tune fills the air, and the very sun, it seems, bids fair to start a jig up in the sky! Yes my lad, that's how it was!"

"Every fibre in your body understood that song, and you became its slave, body and soul. If Loiko had then cried out: 'To knives, comrades!' we'd have snatched up our knives as one man and followed him blindly. He could do anything he wanted with a man, and everybody loved him, loved him mightily—only Radda had no eyes for the lad. That wouldn't have been so bad, worse was she mocked him. She smote that lad's heart sorely, aye sorely! He'd gnash his teeth, Loiko would, pulling at his moustache. Eyes darker than an abyss, and sometimes with a gleam of something fit to harrow up the soul. At night he'd go far out into the steppe, would Loiko, and his fiddle would weep till morning, weep over the death of Loiko's liberty. And we lay listening and thinking: what's to be done? We knew that if two stones are rolling down on each other it's no use getting between them—they'd crush you. That's how things were."

"Well, we all sat assembled, discussing affairs. Then things got dull. So Danilo asks Loiko: 'Sing a song, Loiko, something to cheer the soul!' The lad glanced at Radda who was lying at a little distance with her face looking up into the sky, and drew his bow across the strings. The fiddle spoke as though it were really a maiden's heart, and Loiko sang:

*Hey-ho! A flame the heart doth feed,
Vast the steppe and wide!
Fleet as the wind my gallant steed,
Strong-armed rider astride!*

Radda turned her head, and rising on her elbow, smiled mockingly into the singer's eyes. He reddened like the dawn

*Hey-ho-hey! Up comrade arise!
Onward let us race!
Where steppe in deepest darkness lies,
To waiting dawn's embrace!
Hey-ho! We fly to meet the day,
Soaring above the plain!
Touch not thee in passing, pray*

The beauteous moon with thy mane!

"Did he sing! Nobody sings like that any more!" And Radda says, letting the words drop:

"You shouldn't fly so high, Loiko. You might fall and come down on your nose in a puddle and wet your moustache, be careful" Loiko glared fiercely at her and said nothing—he swallowed it and went on singing:

*Hey-ho-hey! Lest daybreak's flush
Overtake us in idle slumber,
Away, away, ere for shame we blush,
And men begin to wonder!*

"What a song!" said Danilo, 'never heard anything like it before, may the Devil make a pipe out of me if I lie!' Old Noor twitched his moustache and shrugged his shoulders and everybody was delighted with that brave song of Zobar's! Only Radda didn't like it.

"That's how a wasp once buzzed when he tried to imitate the cry of an eagle" said she, and it was as if she had thrown snow over us

"Maybe you'd like a taste of the whip, Radda?" Danilo said, starting up, but Zobar threw his cap on the ground and spoke, his face as dark as the earth:

"Stop, Danilo! A spirited horse needs a steel bridle! Give your daughter to me as wife!"

"Now you've said something!" said Danilo with a smile. 'Take her if you can!'

"Good!" said Loiko and spoke thus to Radda:

"Well, lass, listen to me a while and don't put on airs! I've seen a lot of your sisterhood in my time, aye quite a lot! But not one of them ever touched my heart like you have Ah, Radda, you have snared my soul! Well? What's to be must needs be, and the steed does not exist on which one could escape from one's self! I take you to wife before God, my conscience, your father and all these people.

But mind, you are not to oppose my will—I am a free man and will live the way I want!" And he went up to her, his teeth clenched and eyes flashing We saw him holding out

his hand to her—now, thought we, Radda has bridled the horse of the steppe! Suddenly we saw his hand go up and he fell, hitting the ground with the back of his head with a crash! .

“Good heavens! It was as if a bullet had struck the lad in the heart. Radda, it appears, had swept the whiplash round his legs and pulled it, sending him off his feet.”

“There she was lying back again without stirring, with a mocking smile on her face. We waited to see what would happen next. Loiko sat on the ground clutching his head as though afraid it would burst. Then he got up quietly and walked off into the steppe without a glance at anyone. Noor whispered to me: ‘Keep your eye on him!’ And I crawled after Zobar into the darkness of the steppe. Yes, my lad!”

Makar knocked the ashes out of his pipe and began refilling it again. I drew my coat closer about me and lay looking at his old face, blackened by the sun and winds. He was whispering to himself, shaking his head sternly; his grizzled moustache moved up and down and the wind stirred the hair on his head. He was like an old oak tree seared by lightning, but still strong and sturdy and proud of its strength. The sea still carried on a whispered converse with the shore and the wind still carried its whispers over the steppe. Nonka had stopped singing, and the clouds that had gathered in the sky made the autumn night still darker.

“Loiko dragged his feet wearily along, his head bent and hands hanging nervelessly by his sides, and when he reached a ravine by the stream he sat down on a boulder and groaned. It was a groan that made my heart bleed for pity, but I didn’t go up to him. Grief won’t be comforted by words, will it? That’s just it! He sat on for an hour, then another, and a third, just sat without stirring.”

“And I was lying on the ground nearby. It was a bright night, the whole steppe was bathed in silver moonlight and you could see far away in the distance.

Suddenly, I saw Radda hurrying towards us from the camp

"That cheered me up! 'Ah, splendid!' I thought, 'brave lass, Radda!' She drew close, but he hadn't heard her coming. She put her hand on his shoulder; Loiko started, unclasped his hands and raised his head. Then he leapt to his feet and gripped his knife! 'Ah, he'll knife the maid, I thought,' and I was just going to shout out to the camp and run to them when I suddenly heard:

"Drop it! I'll smash your head! I looked—there was Radda with a pistol in her hand aimed at Zobar's head. There's a hell-cat for you! Well, I thought, they're now matched in strength, I wonder what'll happen next?"

"Look here!—Radda thrust the pistol into her waistband—I didn't come here to kill you, but to make up—drop the knife!" He dropped it and looked sullenly into her eyes! It was a sight, brother! There were two people glaring at each other like animals at bay, and both such fine, brave people. There were just the shining moon and I looking on, that's all.

"Now, listen to me, Loiko. I love you!" said Radda. He merely shrugged, as though tied hand and foot.

"I've seen brave youths, but you're braver and better in face and soul! Any of them would have shaven their moustache had I so much as winked my eye, all of them would have fallen at my feet had I wished it! But what's the sense? They're none too brave anyway, and I'd have made them all womanish! There are few brave Gypsies left in the world as it is, very few, Loiko. I never loved anybody, Loiko, but you I love. But I love liberty too! I love liberty, Loiko, more than I do you. But I cannot live without you, as you cannot live without me. So I want you to be mine, body and soul, do you hear?" He smiled a twisted smile.

"I hear! It cheers the heart to hear your speeches! Say some more!"

"This more I want to say, Loiko: no matter how you twist I'll have my way with you, you'll be mine. So don't waste time."

I shall kiss you sweetly, Loiko! Under my kisses you shall forget your adventurous life.and your lively songs which so gladden the hearts of the Gypsy lads will be heard no more in tha steppe—you shall sing other songs, tender love songs to me, Radda Waste not time then—I have spoken, therefore tomorrow you shall obey me like the youth who obeys his elder comrade You shall bow the knee to me before the whole Gypsy camp and kiss my right hand—then I shall be your wife."

"So that's what she was after, the mad girl! It was unheard of! It had been the custom once among the Montenegrins, so the old men said, but never among the Gypsies! Well, my lad, can you think of anything funnier than that? Not if you racked your brains a year, you wouldn't!"

Loiko recoiled and his cry rang out over the steppe like that of a man wounded in the breast. Radda winced but did not betray herself.

"Well, good-bye till tomorrow and tomorrow you will do as I bade you. Do you hear, Loiko?"

"I hear! I will" groaned Zobar and held his arms out to her. She went without even turning her head, and he swayed like a tree broken by the wind and dropped to the ground, sobbing and laughing.

"That is what the accursed Radda did to the poor lad. I had a job bringing him to his senses

"Ah well! Why the devil should people have to drain the cup of misery? Who cares to hear a human heart moaning in pain and grief? Make it out if you can!.."

"I went back to the camp and told the old men all about it They thought the matter over and decided to wait and see what would happen. And this is what happened When we all gathered next evening around the campfire Loiko joined us He was gloomy and had become terribly haggard overnight and his eyes were sunken. He cast them down and, without raising them, said to us:

"I want to tell you something, comrades. I looked into

my heart this night and found no place therein for the old carefree life of mine Radda alone dwells in it—and that's all! There she is, beautiful Radda, smiling like a queen! She loves her liberty more than me, and I love her more than my liberty, and I have decided to bend my knee to her, as she bade me, so that all may see how her beauty has conquered brave Loiko Zobar, who until he knew her used to play with the girls like a gerfalcon with the ducks After that she will become my wife and will kiss and caress me, so that I will have no more desire to sing you songs and will not regret my liberty! Is that right, Radda?" He raised his eyes and looked darkly at her. She silently and sternly nodded her head and pointed her hand to her feet And we looked on, understanding nothing. We even felt like going away, not to see Loiko Zobar prostrate himself at a maid's feet, even though that maid were Radda. We felt sort of ashamed, and sorry and sad

"Well!" cried Radda to Zobar

"Aha, don't be in a hurry, there's plenty of time, you'll have more than enough of it" he retorted with a laugh And that laugh had a ring of steel in it

"So that's all I wanted to tell you, comrades! What next? It remains next but to test whether Radda has so strong a heart as she showed me. I'll test it—forgive me, brothers!"

Before we could fathom these words Radda lay stretched on the earth with Zobar's curved knife sunk to the hilt in her breast We were horror-struck

And Radda pulled out the knife, threw it aside, and pressing a lock of her black hair to the wound, said loudly and audibly with a smile:

"Farewell, Loiko! I knew you would do that! . ." and she died

"D'you grasp the kind of maid that was, my lad? A hell of a maid she was, may I be damned to eternity!"

"Oh! Now I'll kneel at your feet, proud queen!" Loiko's loud cry echoed all over the steppe, and throwing

himself to the ground he pressed his lips to the feet of dead Radda and lay motionless. We took off our caps and stood in silence

"What do you say to that, my lad? Aye, that's just it! Noor said: 'We ought to bind him!...' No hand would lift to bind Loiko Zobar, not a hand would lift, and Noor knew it. He waved his hand and turned away. And Danilo picked up the knife which Radda had cast aside and gazed long at it, his moustache twitching. The blade of that knife, so curved and sharp, was still wet with Radda's blood. And then Danilo went up to Zobar and stuck the knife into his back over the heart. For he was Radda's father, was Danilo the old soldier!"

"There you are!" said Loiko in a clear voice, turning to Danilo, and he followed on the heels of Radda.

And we stood looking. There lay Radda pressing a lock of hair to her bosom, and her open eyes stared into the blue sky while at her feet brave Loiko Zobar lay stretched. His face was covered by his locks and you couldn't see his face.

"We stood lost in thought. Old Danilo's moustaches trembled and his bushy brows were knitted. He stared at the sky and said nothing, while Noor, grey old Noor, lay down with his face on the ground and all his old body was racked with sobs."

"There was something to cry over, my lad!"

"...So you're going on the tramp—well, go your way, don't turn off the road. You go straight on. Maybe you won't go to the dogs. That's all my lad!"

Makar fell silent, and putting the pipe into his pouch, wrapped his coat over his chest. Rain began to fall in a drizzle, the wind was rising, the sea growled and rumbled angrily. The horses one by one came up to the dying campfire and regarding us with their big intelligent eyes stopped motionless around us in a dense ring.

"Hey, hey ho!" Makar cried to them kindly, and patting the neck of his favourite black horse, said, turning to me:

"Time to go to sleep!" and, drawing his coat over his head and stretching his great length out on the ground he fell silent I did not feel like sleeping I gazed into the darkness of the steppe and before my eyes swum the queenly beautiful image of proud Radda She was pressing a lock of hair to the wound in her breast and through her delicate swarthy fingers the blood oozed drop by drop, falling to the ground like flaming-red little stars.

Following close on her heels there floated the vision of the brave Gypsy lad Loiko Zobar. His face was screened by thick black locks from under which big cold tears fell fast

The rain grew heavier and the sea was chanting a mournful solemn dirge to the proud pair of Gypsy lovers-to Loiko Zobar and to Radda, the daughter of the old soldier Danilo.

And they both hovered silently in the misty darkness, and the dashing Loiko, try as he may, was unable to catch up with the proud Radda

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OLD IZERGIL

I

I heard these stories at a place on the Bessarabian coast, near Akkerman.

One evening, having finished our day's grape picking, the group of Moldavians with whom I was working, went off to the beach I remained behind with old Izergil, reclining on the ground, in the shade of a thick vine, silently watching the silhouettes of the people who were going down to the sea merge with the falling shadows of night.

They strolled down to the beach singing and laughing. The men in short tunics and wide pantaloons had bronzed faces, thick black moustaches and heavy locks of hair that reached down to their shoulders. The women and girls, merry and graceful, had dark blue eyes, and their faces too were bronzed. Their black, silky hair hung loose down their backs, and the warm, light breeze, that blew through the tresses, caused the ornamental coins that were plaited into them to tinkle. The wind blew in a broad, even stream; but now and again it seemed to leap over some invisible obstacle, and heavy gusts caused the women's hair to spread in fantastic manes around their heads, giving them the appearance of having walked out of some strange legend. As they receded further and further away from us, the night and my imagination clothed them with increasing beauty.

Someone was playing a fiddle. A girl was singing in a soft contralto. The sound of laughter was heard.

The air was impregnated with the pungent odour of the sea and of the greasy exhalation of the earth, which the rain had thoroughly saturated just before sundown. Even now fragments of clouds wandered across the sky in grotes-

que shapes and colours—here soft, like wreaths of smoke, blue and ash-grey, and there ragged, like fragments of rock, a dull black or brown. Between them fondly peeped dark blue patches of the sky, dotted with golden stars. All this—the sounds and smells, the clouds and the people—looked strangely beautiful and sad, like the beginning of a wonderful tale. And everything seemed as though it were checked in its growth, as if it were dying. The sounds of the voices, receded further into the distance, subsided, and became nothing but mournful sighs.

"Why didn't you go with them?" old Izergil asked me, nodding in the direction in which the people had gone.

Time had bent her double; her once shining black eyes were dull and bleary. Her dry voice sounded strange; it crackled, as if she were crunching bones.

"I didn't feel like it!" I answered.

"Ekh! You Russians are born old. You are all as gloomy as demons. Our girls are afraid of you. But you are young and strong."

The moon rose, large, round and blood-red, seemingly out of the bowels of this steppe, which had absorbed so much human flesh and blood in its time, and probably for that reason had become so rich and fertile. And as it rose it threw upon us the lace-like shadows of the vine leaves, and the old woman and I appeared to be covered with a net. To the left of us the shadows of the clouds flitted across the steppe; and the clouds themselves, lit up by the bluish rays of the moon, seemed brighter and more transparent.

"Look! That's Larra!"

I looked in the direction in which the old woman pointed with her trembling hand and crooked fingers, and I saw shadows floating, many of them; but one was darker and thicker than the rest, and it moved faster and lower than its sisters—it fell from a clump of cloud which was floating nearer to the ground and was moving faster than the others.

"I can't see anybody," I said.

"Your eyes are worse than mine, an old woman's! Look! Over there! The dark one, running across the steppe!"

I looked again, and again saw nothing but shadows, "That's a shadow! Why do you call it Larra!"

"Because it is he. He is now no more than a shadow. No wonder! He has lived thousands of years; the sun dried up his body, his blood and his bones, and the wind blew them away like dust. You see what God can do to a man for being proud!"

"Tell me how it happened!" I begged of the old woman, expecting to hear one of the wonderful stories that are composed in the steppes.

And she told me the following story.

"This happened many thousands of years ago. Far beyond the sea, where the sun rises, there is a country with a big river; and in that country every tree leaf and blade of grass gives as much shadow as a man needs to shelter him from the sun, which is very hot there."

"That's how bountiful the earth is in that country!"

"In that country there lived a powerful tribe of men. They herded their cattle and spent their strength and manhood in hunting, in feasting after the hunt, singing songs and frolicking with the girls."

"One day, during a feast, one of the girls, black-haired and tender like the night, was carried away by an eagle, which swooped down from the sky. The arrows which the men shot at the eagle, pitiful things, failed to reach it and dropped back to earth. The men then went out to search for the girl, but they searched in vain. They failed to find her. And then they forgot about her, as everything on earth is forgotten."

The old woman sighed and paused. Her grating voice had sounded like the complaints of all the forgotten ages which had revived in her breast in shadowy recollections. The sea had softly accompanied the opening of one of

those ancient legends which had probably been composed on its shore

"Twenty years after, the girl came back herself, worn and haggard. With her was a young man, handsome and strong, as she herself had been twenty years before. When they asked her where she had been, she said that the eagle had carried her away to the mountains, and she had lived with him there as his wife. The young man was her son; his father was dead. When he grew feeble he soared for the last time high into the sky and, folding his wings, dropped heavily onto the jagged crags of the mountain and was killed."

"Everybody looked in wonder at the eagle's son and saw that he differed in no way from themselves, except that his eyes were cold and proud, like those of the king of birds. When they talked to him he answered if he had a mind to, or else remained silent; and when the elders of the tribe came and spoke to him, he addressed them as an equal. They regarded this as an affront. They upbraided him and said he was still an unfeathered arrow with an unsharpened point, and told him that they were honoured and obeyed by thousands like him, and by thousands twice as old as he. But he looked boldly at them and answered that he had no equal, and if others honoured them, he did not wish to do so. Oh! Then they became really angry with him, and angrily they said-

"There is no place for him among us! Let him go wherever he wills!"

He laughed and went where he willed—to a beautiful girl who had been gazing intently at him; he went up to her and embraced her. But she was the daughter of one of the elders who had rebuked him; and although he was so handsome she pushed him away, for she was afraid of her father. She pushed him away and walked off, but he struck her, and when she fell to the ground he stood upon her chest, so that the blood spurted from her mouth to the sky. The girl gasped, writhed like a snake, and died.

"All those who witnessed this were petrified by fear—this was the first time a woman had been killed among them in this way. They stood silent for a long time, now looking at the dead girl lying on the ground with open eyes and bloodstained mouth, and now at the young man standing beside the girl, proudly facing them all—he did not hang his head as if asking to be punished. When they recovered from their surprise they seized and bound him, and left him there; for they thought it would be too simple a matter to kill him off-hand, that would not satisfy them."

The night grew darker and became filled with strange, soft sounds. The marmots whistled mournfully in the steppe, and the metallic grating of the grasshoppers was heard in the leaves of the vine; the leaves sighed and whispered to each other; the full moon, blood-red before, was now pale and grew paler as it rose over the earth; the bluish haze spread more widely over the steppe.... .

"And so they gathered together to devise the punishment that would fit the crime. Some suggested that he should be torn apart by horses, but this was thought too lenient. Others proposed that each one should shoot an arrow at him, but this too was rejected. Somebody proposed that he be burnt at the stake, but this was rejected because the smoke from the fire would prevent them from seeing how he suffered. Many proposals were made, but not one of them seemed to be satisfactory. And while they were discussing this, his mother knelt before them in silence, unable to find either the tears nor the words with which to plead for mercy. They talked and talked for hours until, at last, one of the wise men, after long reflection said:

“Let us ask him why he did it!”

They asked him and he answered:

“Unbind me! I will not speak while I am bound!”

And when they unbound him he asked in a tone as if he was speaking to slaves:

“What do you want?”

“You have heard” answered the wise man.

"why should I explain my conduct to you?"

"So that we may understand Listen, proud one! You will die . Make us understand what you have done We shall remain alive, and it is useful for us to know more than we know now"

"Very well, I will tell you, although I myself do not quite understand what happened I think I killed her because she rebuffed me But I wanted her"

"But she was not yours!" he was told

"Do you use only that which belongs to you? I see that every man possesses only speech, arms and legs . but he owns cattle, women, land and many other things"

In answer to this he was told that for every thing a man takes he pays with himself: with his wisdom, his strength, and sometimes with his life But he answered that he wanted to keep himself whole

They talked to him for a long time and at last realized that he regarded himself as the first in the land and had no thought for anybody but himself They were all horrified by the isolation to which he had doomed himself He belonged to no tribe; he had not a mother, nor cattle, nor a wife, and he wanted nothing of the kind

When the people realized this they began to discuss again what punishment to inflict upon him But this time they did not debate for long The wise man, who had remained silent up to now, spoke up and said:

"Stay! I have a punishment A terrible punishment You would not have thought of one like it in a thousand years! The punishment lies in himself Let him go Let him be free That will be his punishment!"

"In that instant a wonderful thing happened A loud clap of thunder burst in the sky, although no clouds were visible The celestial powers thus signified their approval of what the wise man had said All bowed low and dispersed But the young man, who was now given the name of Larra, which means outcast, laughed loudly at the people who were leaving him He laughed as he remained alone,

as free as his father had been. But his father had not been a human, whereas he was. And so he began to live as free as a bird. He stole up to the tribe's encampment and carried away their cattle, their girls, everything he wanted. They shot arrows at him, but his body was protected by the invisible armour of his supreme punishment—he could not die. He was agile, rapacious, strong and cruel, but he never met men face to face. He was seen only at a distance. And so he hovered alone, round the habitations of the tribe, for a long, long time, for many scores of years. But one day he came very near to the habitations of the tribe and when the men ran out to seize him he did not run away, and made no signs that he intended to defend himself. One of the men guessed what was the matter and shouted out loudly:

“Don’t touch him! He wants to die!”

And all halted at once, not wishing to ease the lot of the one who had done them evil, not wishing to kill him. They halted and jeered at him. He stood trembling, listening to the jeers, and seemed to be searching for something in his bosom. Suddenly he stooped, picked up a rock and rushed at the men. But they, avoiding his blows, did not strike him; and when, at last, he fell to the ground with a despairing cry of weariness, they stood aside and watched him. He raised himself, picked up a knife which one of the men had dropped during the fray, and plunged it into his own breast. But the blade snapped as if it had struck a stone. He fell down again and beat his head on the ground, but the ground yielded to the blows and only dents were left in it.

“He cannot die!” the people shouted gleefully.

“They went away and left him. He lay face upwards and saw mighty eagles soaring high in the sky, like black dots, and his eyes were filled with bitterness, enough to poison all the inhabitants of the world. Since then he has remained alone, free, waiting for death. And so he roams and roams around, roams everywhere. Do you see? He is already like a shadow, and so he will remain

forever He understands neither the speech of men nor their actions, he understands nothing He does nothing but roam and roam, searching for something . . . He knows not life, nor does death smile upon him He has no place among men That is how a man was punished for his pride!"

The old woman sighed and stopped speaking, and her head, which had drooped to her breast, swayed to and fro several times, in a very queer way.

I looked at her It seemed to me that sleep had overcome her, and for some reason I felt very sorry for her She had ended her story in such an exalted and admonitory tone, but for all that, there was a furtive, slavish note in it

The people on the beach began to sing, and to sing in a strange way First the contralto voice was heard It sang two or three bars and then another voice started the song from the beginning while the first continued and then a third, a fourth and a fifth voice began the song, one after the other Suddenly, the same song was started, from the beginning, by a chorus of male voices

The voice of each woman was heard distinctly from the rest, and all their mingled voices sounded like a rainbow-coloured mountain stream that comes tumbling from ledge to ledge, leaping and gurgling as they merged with the deep tones of the male voices which floated upward to meet them, separating from them, drowning them, and again rising high, pure and strong, one after another.

Because of the voices, the sound of the sea could no longer be heard

II

"Have you ever heard singing like that anywhere else?" —Izergil asked me, raising her head and smiling, revealing her toothless gums

"No, I haven't, I've never heard anything like it anywhere "

"And you never will. We are very fond of singing. Only handsome people can sing well, handsome people, who are fond of life. We are fond of life. Aren't the people who are singing over there tired after their day's work? They worked from sunrise to sunset, but as soon as the moon rose they began to sing! Those who don't know how to live would have gone to bed, but those who find pleasure in life—sing!"

"But health . . ." I began

"One always has enough health to live. Health! If you had money, wouldn't you spend it? Health is the same as gold. Do you know what I did when I was young? I wove carpets from sunrise to sunset, almost without getting up. I was as lively as a sunbeam, and yet I was obliged to sit all day long, as motionless as a stone. And I sat so long that all my bones ached. But when night came, I hurried to the one I loved, to fondle and embrace him. And this I did for three whole months, while love lasted; I spent all my nights with him. And yet I have lived right up to now—I had enough blood in my veins, didn't I? And how much I loved! How many kisses I took, and gave! . . ."

I looked into her face. Her black eyes remained dull, her recollections had roused no spark in them. The moon lit up her dry, cracked lips, sharp chin with the grey hairs on it, and her wrinkled nose, which was drawn up, like the beak of an owl. Her cheeks were dark hollows, in one of which lay a strand of ash-grey hair which had straggled from under the scarlet rag which she had wound about her head. Her face, neck and hands were wrinkled, and every time she moved I expected the dry skin to crack and break and fall away in pieces, leaving before me a bare skeleton, with dull, black eyes.

She began to talk again in her grating voice.

"I lived with my mother near Falma, on the very bank of the River Birlat; I was fifteen years old when he first came to our farm. He was tall and graceful and had a black moustache, and he was so jolly! He was in a boat,

and he called out in a ringing voice, so that we heard him through the window: 'Hey! Have you any wine and something to eat?' I looked out of the window and through the branches of the ash tree I saw the river, all blue from the moon. And he, in a white tunic with a broad sash round his waist with the ends dangling at his side, was standing with one foot in the boat and the other on the bank, swaying and singing to himself. When he saw me he said: 'What a lovely lass lives here! And I didn't know!' As if he knew all the lovely lasses in the world but me. I gave him wine and some boiled pork. Four days later I gave myself to him, entirely. We used to go rowing together, at night. He used to come and whistle softly like a marmot, and I used to leap out of the window into the river like a fish. And then we would go rowing, on and on. He was a fisherman on the Prut, and later, when my mother learned about everything and beat me, he tried to persuade me to go with him to Dobruja, and further, on to the branches of the Danube. But by that time I had already ceased to love him—all he did was sing and kiss, and nothing more! I got tired of it. At that time a gang of Huzulians roamed those parts, and they had their lovers there. Now, those girls had a merry time! One of them would wait and wait for her Carpathian, wondering whether he was in prison, or had been killed in a fight somewhere, and suddenly he would turn up alone, or with two or three of his comrades, as if he had dropped from the skies. He would bring her rich presents—after all, they came by everything so easily! And he used to feast at her house and praise her to his comrades. This pleased her very much. I asked a friend of mine who had a Huzulian for a lover to let me see them. What was her name? I have forgotten. I have begun to forget everything now. This was very long ago. No wonder I have forgotten it! Well, she introduced me to one of those lads. A handsome fellow. He was red-haired, all red, moustaches and locks! A fiery head! But he looked so sad. Sometimes he was tender, but at other times he used to fight and roar like a wild beast. Once he slapped my face and I sprang at him like a cat and dug my teeth into his cheek. After that he had a

dimple in that cheek, and he used to like⁹ me to kiss the dimple"

"But what became of the fisherman?" I enquired.

"The fisherman? Oh, he . . . he joined that gang of Huzulians At first he kept begging with me to go with him and threatened to throw me into the river if I didn't, but he gave it up after a time He joined the gang and got himself another girl . . . They were both hanged together---this fisherman and the other lad. I went to see them hanged It was in Dobruja The fisherman went to the gallows weeping, he was as pale as death; but the other lad calmly smoked his pipe. He went along smoking, his hands in his pockets, one moustache lying on his shoulder, and the other dangling over his chest He saw me, and taking his pipe out of his mouth he called out: 'Good-bye! ..' I grieved for him a whole year, Ekh!. This happened just as they were about to leave for their homes in the Carpathians They had a farewell party in a Rumanian's house, and there they were caught Only two were taken. Several were killed, and the rest got away . . They paid the Rumanian out for this, though... they set fire to his house, to his windmill and his cornfields He became a beggar after that "

"Did you do it?"—I asked,

"Those Huzulians had lots of friends, I was not the only one .. Whoever was their best friend, that one said these prayers for the dead . . . "

The singing on the beach had stopped by now, and the old woman's voice was accompanied only by the sound of the surging sea—that pensive, restless sound was indeed a splendid accompaniment to this tale of a restless life. The night became milder, made brighter by the pale light of the moon, the vague sounds of the restless life of the night's invisible inhabitants gradually died out, they were drowned by the increasing sound of the waves . . . for the wind was rising

"There was also a Turk that I was in love with I lived in his harem, in Skutari. I lived there a whole week. It

was not so bad .But I grew tired of it Nothing but women and women .He had eight of them . All day long they did nothing but eat, sleep and talk nonsense . .Or else they'd quarrel and cackle at each other like hens . .He was no longer young, that Turk His hair was almost grey, and he looked so pompous He was rich too He talked like a bishop He had black eyes and they looked straight at you right into your soul He was very fond of saying his prayers I first saw him in Bucharest in the market place. He was walking about like a king, looking ever so important I smiled at him That same evening I was seized in the street and carried to his house He was a merchant who traded in sandal and palmwood, and he had come to Bucharest to buy something 'Will you come with me?' he asked me 'Oh, yes, certainly' 'All right!' And so I went with him He was rich, was that Turk He had a son—a dark little boy, and so graceful . He was about sixteen It was with him that I ran away from the Turk . I ran away to Bulgaria, to Lom-Palanka There a Bulgarian woman stabbed me in the chest because of her lover, or her husband, I have forgotten which "

"I lay sick for a long time in a nunnery A Polish girl nursed me She had a brother, a monk in a monastery near Arzer-Palanka, and he used to visit her He wriggled like a worm in front of me When I got well I went away with him . to his country, Poland "

"Wait a minute! What became of the little Turk?"

"The boy? He died Whether it was from homesickness, or from love, I don't know, but he withered, like a newly-planted tree which gets too much sun He simply dried up I can almost see him now, lying all transparent and bluish, like a piece of ice; but the flame of love was still burning in him. And he kept on begging me to bend over and kiss him I loved him and, I remember, I kissed him a lot .Then he got very bad—he could scarcely move He lay on his bed and begged me pitifully, like a beggar asking for alms, to lie next to him and warm

him. I did so, and as soon as I got next to him he would get as hot as fire. Once I woke up and found he was quite cold. ... He was dead.... I wept over him. Who can say? Perhaps it was I who killed him. I was then twice his age and I was so strong and full of vigour.... But he, he was only a boy!"

She sighed and—for the first time that I saw—crossed herself three times and mumbled something with her dry lips

“Well, so you went to Poland”—I prompted her.

“Yes... with that little Pole. He was a mean and despicable thing. When he wanted a woman he used to sidle up to me like a tomcat and speak to me with words that flowed from his lips like hot honey; but when he did not want me he used to snarl at me, and his words sounded like the crack of a whip. Once we were walking along the river bank and he was arrogant and offensive to me. Oh! Oh! wasn’t I mad! I bubbled like boiling pitch! I took him up in my arms like a child—he was only a little fellow—held him and squeezed his sides so hard that his face became livid. And then I swung him round and threw him into the river. He yelled. It was so funny to hear him yell. I looked down at him struggling in the water and then went away. I didn’t meet him again after that. I was lucky in that way: I never met again the men I had loved. Meetings like that are not at all pleasant. It’s like meeting the dead.”

The old woman stopped speaking and sighed. I pictured to myself the people she had resurrected: the fiery-red, bewhiskered Huzulian going to his death, calmly smoking his pipe; probably he had cold blue eyes which had looked upon everything with a firm and concentrated gaze. At his side is the black-whiskered fisherman from the Prut, weeping, not wanting to die. His face is pallid in anticipation of death, his merry eyes are now dull, and his moustaches, now moist with tears, dangle disconsolately from the corners of his contorted mouth. And the old, pompous Turk, probably a fatalist and a despot, and by his side

his son, a pale and tender flower of the Orient, poisoned by kisses And the conceited Pole, polite and cruel, eloquent and cold All are only pale shadows now, and the one whom they had embraced was sitting beside me alive, but withered by time, without a body, without blood, with a heart without desires, and with eyes that lacked the glint of life—also almost a shadow

She began to speak again:

"I had a hard time in Poland The people who live there are cold and false. I could not understand their serpent's language. They hiss when they speak . Why do they hiss? God must have given them this serpent's language because they are false I roamed about the country not knowing where I was going, but I saw that they were preparing to rise in revolt against you Russians I reached the town of Bokhnia A Jew bought me, not for himself but to trade with my body I consented to this To be able to live one must be able to do something I couldn't do anything, so I had to pay with my body. But I thought to myself: when I get enough money to enable me to go back home on the Birlat I will break my chains, no matter how strong they may be What a life I led there! Rich gentlemen used to come to my house and feast there. That cost them a pretty penny, I can tell you They used to fight over me and ruin themselves One of them tried a long time to get me, and this is what he did One day he came to visit me, accompanied by his servant who carried a bag The gentleman took the bag and spilled its contents over my head Golden coins poured from the bag, hitting my head, but the ringing sound they made as they struck the floor was delightful to my ears For all that I drove that gentleman away He had a fat, moist face and a belly like a big pillow. He looked like a well-fed pig Yes, I drove him away, although he told me that he had sold all his land, his house and his horses to be able to besprinkle me with gold At that time I loved a worthy gentleman with a scarred face His face was criss-crossed with scars, from wounds inflicted by the Turks, with whom he had recently been fighting on behalf of

the Greeks. Now that was a man! He was a Pole, so why should he bother about the Greeks? But he went to help them fight their enemies. His face was slashed, he lost an eye, and also two fingers from his left hand.He was a Pole, so why should he bother about the Greeks? The reason is that he admired brave deeds, and a man who admires brave deeds will always find an opportunity to perform them. There is always room for brave deeds in life, you know. And those who find no opportunity to perform them are simply lazybones or cowards, or else they do not know what life is, because if people knew what life is, they would all want to leave their shadow in it after they have gone. And then life would not devour people without leaving a trace. Oh, that man with the scars was a really good man! He was ready to go to the end of the world to do something worth while I suppose your people killed him during the rebellion. Why did you go to fight the Magyars? All right, all right, don't say anything!"

Commanding me not to say anything, old Izergil fell silent herself and became lost in thought. After a little while she said:

"I also knew a Magyar. One day he left my house—this was in the winter—and he was found only in the spring, when the snow had thawed; they found him in a field with a bullet through his head. What do you think of that? You see, love kills no fewer people than the plague does; I'm sure you'll find it so if you counted up ... What was I talking about? About Poland ... Yes, I played my last game there I met a squire there... Wasn't he handsome! As handsome as the devil I was already old, oh, so old! Was I already forty? Yes, I believe I was. He was still proud, and still spoilt by us women. It cost me a lot to get him ... Yes He wanted to take me like a common woman, but to this I would not agree. I was never anybody's slave. I had already settled with the Jew I gave him a lot of money, and I was already living in Cracow. I had everything then, horses, and gold, and servants. He used to

come to me as proud as a demon and wanted me to throw myself into his arms We quarrelled . I remember I even lost my good looks because of it This dragged on for a long time But I won in the end; he went down on his knees to me But soon after he took me, he gave me up Then I realized that I was already old Oh, how bitter that was! Oh, so bitter! You see, I loved that devil . But when we met he used to jeer at me Mean fellow! And he used to make fun of me to others, I knew that That was hard to bear, I can tell you! But I had him near me, and after all I loved him When he went off to fight you Russians I was sick with longing for him I tried to fight the feeling down, but couldn't And so I decided to go to him He was stationed in the woods, near Warsaw ”

“But when I got there I found out that your people had already beaten them . and that he was a prisoner in a village, not far away.”

“That means that I won't see him any more, I thought to myself But oh, how I longed to see him! So I tried to get him I dressed up as a beggar, pretended to be lame, and tying up my face I went to the village It was filled with Cossacks and soldiers . It cost me a lot to be there! I found out where the Poles were I could see that it would be no easy task to get there But I had to get there! So one night I crept up to the place, through a vegetable plot, between the furrows, suddenly a sentry barred my way. But I could already hear the Poles singing and talking loudly They were singing a song to the Mother of God, and I could hear my Arkadek's voice I couldn't help thinking bitterly of the time when men used to crawl in front of me, and here I was, crawling on the ground like a snake for the sake of a man, and perhaps crawling to my death The sentry heard me and stepped forward. What was I to do? I got up from the ground and went towards him. I had no knife with me or anything, only my hands and my tongue. I was sorry I had not taken my dagger with me I whispered: 'Wait!' But the soldier pointed his

bayonet at my throat. I whispered to him: 'Don't stab me, wait! Listen to me, if you have a soul! I have nothing to give you, but I beg of you' He lowered his rifle and said to me, also in a whisper: 'go away, woman, Go away! What do you want here?' I told him that my son was a prisoner here 'Do you understand, soldier—a son! You have a mother, haven't you? Look at me, then—I have a son like you, and he's over there! Let me have a look at him, perhaps he will die soon .. and perhaps you will be killed tomorrow. Won't your mother weep for you? Won't it be hard for you to die without having seen your mother? So it will be for my son Take pity on yourself, and on him, and on me—a mother!"

"Oh, how long I pleaded with him! It was raining, and we were both drenched The wind raged and roared, buffeting me, now in the back and now in the chest. I stood swaying in front of that stony-hearted soldier, but he kept on saying: 'No! No! And every time I heard that cold word the desire to see my Arkadek flared up still hotter in my breast .. While I was talking I sized up the soldier—he was short and thin, and he coughed I dropped to the ground in front of him and embraced his knees, pleading with him with burning words to let me pass Suddenly I gave a hard tug and the soldier fell to the ground, into the mud I quickly turned him over face downwards and pressed his face down into a puddle to prevent him from shouting But he didn't shout, he only struggled, trying to throw me off his back, I pressed his face deeper into the mud with both my hands, and he was suffocated. Then I dashed to the barn where the Pole was locked up. 'Arkadek!' I whispered through a chink in the wall. They have sharp ears, have those Poles. They heard me and stopped singing! I could see his eyes opposite mine 'Can you come out here?' I whispered 'Yes, through the floor!' he said. 'Come out, then.' And four of them crept out from the barn; three, and my Arkadek, 'Where's the sentry?' Arkadek asked me 'He's lying over there!' And we crept along quietly, ever so quietly, crouching low on

the ground The rain was pouring down in torrents, the wind roared We left the village and entered a forest We walked for a long time in silence We walked quickly. Arkadek held my hand, his hand was hot and trembling. Oh! I felt so good walking by his side, he not saying a word Those were the last moments—the last good moments of my greedy life At last we came out on a meadow and halted They thanked me, all four of them Oh, how long and how much they talked, something I didn't understand! I listened to them, but kept my eyes fixed on my gentleman, wondering what he would do Suddenly he embraced me and said in such an important tone I don't remember what he said exactly, but what he meant was that he would love me now out of gratitude for having helped him to escape And he dropped down on his knees in front of me and said with a smile: 'My queen!' False dog! I was so mad that I kicked him and wanted to slap his face, but he staggered and jumped to his feet He stood in front of me pale and threatening The other three also stood frowning at me And nobody said a word I looked at them and felt—I remember it quite well—only a feeling of disgust and apathy I said to them: 'Go!' Those dogs asked me: 'Will you go back there and tell them which way we've gone?' Weren't they mean, eh? Still, they went away, and I went away too Next day your people took me, but they soon let me go Then I realized that it was time for me to build myself a nest I'd had enough of living like a cuckoo! I had become heavy, my wings were weak, and my feathers had lost their sheen Yes, it was time, high time! So I went to Galicia, and from there to Dobruja Since then I have been living here, nearly thirty years I had a husband, a Moldavian He died about a year ago And now I am living like this! Alone No, not alone With them."

With that the old woman waved her hand in the direction of the sea It was all quiet on the beach now Now and again a brief, deceptive sound was born, only to die again

"They are fond of me I tell them such a lot of interesting things, and they like that They are all still young ...

It feels good to be with them. I look at them and think to myself: I was like them once ..Only in my time people had more vim and vigour, and that was why life was merrier and better. . . Yes! . . ."

She fell silent. I felt sad sitting next to her. But she dozed, nodding her head and whispering to herself. Perhaps she was praying. A cloud rose up from the sea—black, heavy and with rugged contours, like the peaks of a mountain range. It crept over the steppe; and as it moved fragments of cloud broke away from its summit and speeded on in front, putting the stars out, one after another. The sea surged more loudly. In the vines, at a little distance from us, the sounds of kissing, whispering and sighing were heard. Far away in the steppe a dog whined. The air irritated the nerves with a strange smell which tickled the nostrils. As they crept across the sky the clouds cast on the ground numerous shadows, like flocks of birds, which disappeared and appeared again. Of the moon only a blurred, opal patch remained, and now and again even this was blotted out by a grey clump of cloud. And far away in the steppe, now black and grim, as if hiding and concealing something within itself, tiny blue lights flashed. They appeared for an instant, now here and now there, and vanished, as if a number of people scattered over the steppe, at some distance from each other, were searching for something, and lighting matches, which the wind at once blew out. They were bluish tongues of flame, and there was something weird about them.

"Can you see any sparks?" Izergil asked me.

"What, those blue ones?" I said, pointing into the distance.

"Blue? Yes, that's them . . So they are flying after all! Well, well! I can't see them any more. There's lots of things I can't see now."

"Where do those sparks come from?" I asked the old woman.

I had heard something about those sparks before, but I wanted to hear what old Izergil would tell me about them.

"Those sparks come from the burning heart of Danko," she said "Once upon a time there was a heart, which one day burst into flame. . Well, those sparks come from that flame. I will tell you about it This too is an old tale ... Old. All old! You see what a lot of things happened in the old days! There's nothing like it nowadays—no great deeds, no men, no stories. Why? . Well, tell me! You can't tell me .What do you know? What do any of you young people know? Ekh eh! If you looked into the past well enough, you would find an answer to all your riddles . But you don't look, and that's why you don't know how to live Don't I see how people live? Oh, I see everything, although my eyes are not as good as they used to be! And I see that people don't live, but grub for a living, and spend all their lives on that And having deprived themselves of everything worth having, having wasted all their time, they begin to bemoan their fate What's fate got to do with it? Everybody decides his own fate! I see all sorts of people nowadays, but I don't see any strong ones! What's become of them? And there are fewer and fewer handsome ones "

The old woman became lost in thought, wondering what had become of the strong and handsome men and women; and she gazed into the dark steppe. as if seeking for an answer there,

I waited for her story in silence, for I feared that if I asked her anything she would go off at a tangent again.

At last she began to speak and told me the following story:

III

"Once upon a time, long, long ago, there lived a tribe of people who lived in the steppe, surrounded on three sides by a dense forest. They were a merry, strong and brave people. But one day misfortune befell them. Alien tribes appeared out of the unknown and drove them deep into the forest. The forest was dark and swampy, because

the trees were very old, and their branches were so closely entangled that they shut out the sky, and the sun's rays could scarcely pierce the dense leafage and reach the ground. When the sun's rays did reach the ground, they raised such a stench that people died from it. And then the women and children of this tribe wept and the men became despondent. They realized that they must leave the forest if they wanted to survive, but there were only two ways by which they could do this: they could go back, to their old habitations, but there they would meet their strong and wicked foes; or they could push forward, but here their way was barred by the giants which embraced each other so closely with their mighty branches and clung so tenaciously to the swampy ground with their gnarled roots. These trees stood silent and motionless in grey gloom in the daytime, and at night they seemed to crowd still closer around the people when they lit their fires. Day and night these people who had been accustomed to the broad open spaces of the steppe—were cramped in this dark, evil-smelling forest, which seemed to want to crush them. It was still more frightful when the wind blew through the treetops and the forest was filled with a sinister humming that sounded like a funeral dirge. These people were strong and could have gone out to those who had vanquished them, but they dared not die in battle, because they had traditions to preserve, and if they were killed, their traditions would perish with them. And so they sat through the long nights in mournful reflection amidst the humming of the forest and the poisonous stench of the swamp. And as they sat the shadows cast by their campfires leaped around them in a silent dance; and it seemed as though these were not shadows that were dancing, but the evil spirits of the forest and swamp celebrating their triumph... And so these people sat and pondered. But nothing—neither hard work nor women—wears out the bodies and souls of men as much as mournful thoughts. And so these people grew feeble because of their thoughts. Fear was born among them and it fettered their strong arms. The women gave birth to horror by their wailing over the bodies of those who died.

from the stench, and over the fate of the living who were fettered by fear And cowardly words began to be heard in the forest, at first softly and timidly, but later more loudly and loudly . . . The people were already willing to go to the enemy to make him a gift of their freedom, all were terrified by death; not one was afraid of a life of slavery . But just then Danko appeared and saved them all unaided "

Evidently the old woman had often related the story of Danko's burning heart, for she spoke in an accustomed singsong tone, and her voice, low and grating, vividly conjured up in my mind the noise of the forest amidst which the unhappy hunted people were dying from the poisonous breath of the swamp

"Danko was one of those people, young and handsome Handsome people are always brave And so he said to his comrades: 'You can't remove the rock from the path by thinking Those who do nothing can achieve nothing Why are we wasting our strength in thinking and grieving? Rise up! Let us hew our way through the forest, it must have an end—everything in the world has an end! Let us go! Come on!'"

They looked at him and saw that he was the best one among them, for great strength and living fire shone from his eyes

"Lead us!" they said
"And he led them "

The old woman stopped speaking and gazed into the steppe where the darkness was growing more intense Far away the sparks from Danko's burning heart flashed every now and again, like blue flowers which bloomed only for an instant

"And so Danko led them All followed him like one man, for they believed in him It was a hard road! It was dark; at every step the swamp opened its greedy, putrid maw and swallowed men; and the trees barred their road like a solid wall, their branches intertwined and their roots

stretching in all directions like snakes. Every step cost those people much sweat and blood. They fought their way on for a long time. The forest became thicker as they went, and their strength was giving out! And so they began to murmur against Danko and say that he was young and inexperienced, and did not know where he was leading them. But he went on in front of them, cheerful and calm.

"One day a storm broke over the forest and the trees whispered to each other in a sinister and threatening way. The forest became so dark that it seemed that all the nights which had existed since it arose had gathered together in this one place. And these little people pushed their way through the giant trees amidst the frightful din of the storm; they pushed on, and the mighty swaying trees creaked and hummed in anger, while the lightning flashed over the treetops, illuminating them with its cold blue light, only to vanish as quickly as it had appeared. The people were frightened. The trees, lit up by the cold flashes of lightning, looked as if they were alive, as if they were stretching their long, gnarled arms, intertwined in a close net around them, in order to detain them, to prevent them from escaping from their dark captivity. And out of the gloom among the branches, something frightful, dark and cold stared at them. It was a hard road, and the people, wearied by it, lost heart. But they were ashamed to confess their weakness, and so they vented their anger on Danko, the man who was marching in front of them. They began to complain that he did not know how to lead them. What do you think of that!"

They halted amidst the sinister sounds of the forests, amidst the quivering darkness, tired and angry, and upbraided Danko.

"You, wretched man," they said, "are the cause of our misery! You led us and wore us out, and now you shall die for this!"

"You said: Lead us! and I led you!" exclaimed Danko, facing them proudly. "I have the courage to lead, and

that is why I led you! But you? What have you done to help yourselves? You have only walked, and have not been able to preserve your strength for a long journey! You only walked, like a flock of sheep!

But these words only enraged them all the more
"You shall die! You shall die!" they shouted

The forest hummed and hummed, echoing their cries, and the lightning tore the darkness into shreds Danko looked at those for whose sake he had toiled so hard and saw that they were like wild beasts They crowded around him, not a human expression in any one of their faces, and no mercy could be expected from them Then anger flared up in Danko's heart, but out of pity for the people he subdued it. He loved these people, and believed that they would perish without him And so he yearned to save them, to lead them out on to an easier road, and the light of this mighty yearning shone in his eyes But they, seeing this, thought his eyes were burning with rage, that it was rage that caused them to shine so brightly, and they stood alert, like wolves, waiting for him to attack them, and they closed in around him to be able to seize and kill him He guessed their thoughts, and this made the fire in his heart burn still brighter, for their thoughts saddened him

The forest continued to hum its mournful dirge, the thunder roared, and the rain poured down in torrents

"What can I do for these people?" shouted Danko in a voice that drowned the thunder

Suddenly, he clutched at his breast, tore it open, plucked out his heart and held it high above his head

It burned as brightly as the sun, even brighter The whole forest fell silent, and became lit up with this torch of human love The darkness fled from the light deep into the forest, and quivering, fell into the putrid maw of the swamp The people were petrified with amazement

"Let us go!" shouted Danko, dashing forward and lighting up the path with his burning heart

They surged after him, as if enchanted Then the for-

est hummed again, the trees swayed with astonishment, but the noise was drowned by the tramping of the feet of the people as they ran. They all ran quickly and boldly, drawn on by the wonderful spectacle of the burning heart. Now, too, people perished, but perished without complaints or tears. And Danko was still in front, and his heart blazed and blazed.

Suddenly the forest opened before them, let them out, and remained behind, dense and silent; and Danko, and all the people, plunged into a sea of sunshine and pure air, which had been purified by the rain. Behind them the storm raged over the forest; but here the sun shone, the steppe heaved as if it were breathing, the grass sparkled with the jewels of rain on their blades, and the river glistened like gold. Evening had fallen, and the river, reflecting the rays of setting sun, looked red, like the blood that flowed in a hot stream from Danko's torn breast.

"Danko, proud and brave, scanned the vast steppe stretching before him; he gazed joyfully at the free land and laughed, and pride rang in his laughter. And then he fell down and died."

"The people, overjoyed, and full of hope, did not see that he was dead, and they did not see that his brave heart was still burning beside his dead body. Only one of them, more observant than the rest, saw this and, moved by fear, he stepped upon the proud heart. And the heart burst into sparks and was extinguished"

"That's what causes the blue sparks which appear in the steppe before a storm!"

Now that the old woman had finished her beautiful story, a great silence reigned in the steppe, as if it too was amazed at the strength of will displayed by the brave man Danko, who for the sake of men had plucked his burning heart out and had died, without asking for any reward for himself. The old woman dozed. I looked at her and asked myself how many more tales and recollections remained in her mind. And I thought of Danko's great burning heart,

and of the human imagination which had created such beautiful and thrilling legends

Izergil was now fast asleep The wind blew aside the rags she wore and exposed her withered breast. I covered her old body and stretched out on the ground next to her The steppe was dark and silent Clouds still floated slowly and despondently across the sky The hollow, mournful sounds of the sea reached my ears

CHELKASH

The blue southern sky, darkened by dust, bore a leaden hue; the hot sun, looking down onto the greenish sea as if through a fine grey veil, was barely reflected in the water, which was chopped by the strokes of boats' oars, ships' propellers, the sharp keels of Turkish feluccas and of other vessels that ploughed backwards and forwards in the congested port. The granite-fettered waves, borne down by the immense weights that glided over their crests, beat against the ships' sides and against the shore, growling and foaming, befouled with all sorts of junk

The clang of anchor chains, the clash of the buffers of the railway cars that were bringing up freight, the metallic wail of iron sheets slipping onto the cobble-stones, the muted sounds of wood striking wood, of rambling carts, of ships' sirens rising to a shrill, piercing shriek and dropping to a muffled roar, and the loud voices of the dock labourers, the seamen and the military Customs guards—all mingled in the deafening music of the working day, and quivering and undulating, hovered low in the sky over the port. And from the land, rising to meet them, came wave after wave of other sounds, now muffled and rumbling, causing everything around to vibrate, and now shrill and shrieking, rending the dusty, sultry air.

The granite, the iron, the timber, the cobble-stones in the port, the ships and the men, all breathed the mighty sounds of this fervent hymn to Mercury. But the human voices, scarcely audible in this tumult, were feeble and comical; and the very men who had originally produced these mighty sounds were comical and pitiful to look at. Their grimy, ragged, nimble bodies, bent under the weight of the merchandise they carried on their backs, flitted to

and fro amidst clouds of dust and a welter of heat and sound. They looked insignificant compared with the steel giants, the mountains of merchandise, the rattling railway cars and everything else around them which they themselves had created. The things they themselves had created had enslaved them and robbed them of their personality.

The giant steamers, lying with steam up, shrieked and hissed and heaved deep sighs; and every sound they emitted seemed to breathe scorn and contempt for the grey, dusty, human figures that were creeping along their decks, filling the deep holds with the products of their slavish labour. The long files of dock labourers carrying on their backs hundreds of tons of grain to fill the iron bellies of the ships in order that they themselves might earn a few pounds of this grain to fill their own stomachs, looked so droll that they brought tears to one's eyes. The contrast between these tattered, perspiring men, benumbed with weariness, turmoil and heat, and the mighty machines glistening in the sun, the machines which these very men had made, and which, after all is said and done, were set in motion not by steam, but by the blood and sinew of those who had created them—this contrast constituted an entire poem of cruel irony.

The overwhelming noise, the dust which irritated one's nostrils and blinded one's eyes, the baking and exhausting heat, and everything else around created an atmosphere of tense impatience that was ready to burst out in a terrific upheaval, an explosion that would clear the air and make it possible to breathe freely and easily—after which silence would reign over the earth, and this dusty, deafening, irritating and infuriating tumult would pass away, and the town, the sea and the sky would be tranquil, serene and magnificent.

A bell struck twelve in slow regular strokes. When the last brassy vibrations died away, the savage music of labour sounded softer and a moment later sank to a muffled, discontented murmur. Human voices and the splash of the sea became more audible. It was dinner time.

I

When the dock labourers stopped work and scattered over the port in noisy chattering groups to buy the victuals that the market women were selling, and had squatted down on the cobble-stones in shady corners to eat their dinner, Grishka Chelkash turned up, an old timer, well-known to the people in the port, a confirmed drunkard, and a skilful, daring thief. He was barefooted; his legs were encased in a pair of threadbare corduroy trousers; he wore no hat, and his dirty cotton blouse with a torn collar, which exposed the brown skin drawn tightly over his lean collar bones. His matted, black, grey-streaked hair and his sharp crinkled, rapacious face showed that he had only just got up from sleep. A straw was entangled in his brown moustache, another was sticking to the bristle on his left cheek, and he had a freshly plucked linden twig stuck behind one ear. Tall, gaunt, slightly round-shouldered, he strode slowly over the cobble-stones, wrinkling his hawk-like nose and casting his keen, grey, flashing eyes around, looking for somebody among the dock labourers. Now and again his long, thick brown moustache twitched like the whiskers of a cat, and his hands, held behind his back, rubbed against each other, while his long, crooked, grasping fingers nervously intertwined. Even here, among the hundreds of rough hoboes like himself, he at once became conspicuous by his resemblance to the hawk of the steppe, by his rapacious leanness, and by his deliberate gait, outwardly calm and even, but internally agitated and alert, like the flight of the bird of prey that he reminded one of.

When he drew level with a group of bare-footed dockers who were sitting in the shade of a pile of coal-laden baskets, a thickset lad, whose stupid face was disfigured by scarlet blotches and his neck badly scratched—evidently the results of a recent scrap—got up to meet him. Walking by the side of Chelkash, he said in an undertone:

"The sailors are missing two bales of cloth. . They're searching for them"

"Well?" asked Chelkash, looking the lad up and down.

"What do you mean, well? I say they are searching for them That's all."

"What? Have they been asking for me to go and help in the search?"

Chelkash smiled and looked in the direction of the warehouse of the Volunteer Fleet

"Go to hell!"

The lad turned to go back, but Chelkash stopped him with the exclamation:

"Hey! You do look a sight! Who messed up your shop front like this?" And then he enquired: "Have you seen Mishka about here anywhere?"

"Haven't seen him for a long time!" retorted the other, leaving Chelkash to rejoin his mates

Chelkash proceeded on his way, greeted by everybody as an old acquaintance: but today he was obviously out of sorts, and instead of replying with his customary banter, he snarled in answer to the questions put to him

Suddenly a Customs guard appeared from behind a pile of merchandise, a dark-green, dusty, and truculently erect figure He stood in front of Chelkash, defiantly barring his way, clutched the hilt of his dirk with his left hand and put out his right to take Chelkash by the collar.

"Halt! Where are you going?" he demanded

Chelkash stepped back a pace, raised his eyes to the guard's good-natured but shrewd face and smiled drily

The Customs guard tried to pull a stern face; he puffed out his round, red cheeks, twitched his brows and rolled his eyes ferociously, but he succeeded only in looking comical.

"How many times have I told you not to go prowling around these docks I said I'd smash your ribs in if I caught you! But here you are again!" he shouted.

"How do you do, Semyonich! We haven't met for a long time!" Chelkash answered serenely, preferring his hand

"It wouldn't break my heart if I didn't see you for a century! Clear out of here!"

Nevertheless, Semyonich shook the proffered hand.

"Tell me," continued Chelkash, retaining Semyonich's hand in his tenacious fingers and familiarly shaking his hand. "Have you seen Mishka anywhere around here?"

"Who's Mishka? I don't know any Mishka! You'd better clear out, brother, or else the warehouse guard will see you, and he'll . . ."

"That red-haired chap I worked with on the Kostroma last time," persisted Chelkash.

"The one you go thieving together, you mean, don't you? They took that Mishka of yours to the hospital. He met with an accident and broke his leg. Now go along, brother, while I'm asking you quietly, otherwise I'll give you one in the neck!"

"There! And you say you don't know Mishka! You do know him after all! What are you so wild about, Semyonich?"

"Now then, now then! Don't try to get round me! Clear out of here, I tell you!"

The guard was getting angry, and looking round from one side to another, he tried to tear his hand out of Chelkash's close grip. But Chelkash calmly gazed at the guard from under his thick eye brows and keeping a tight hold on his hand went on to say:

"Don't hustle me! I'll have my say and then go away. Well now, tell me, how're you getting on? How's the wife, and the children? Are they well?" With flashing eyes, and teeth bared in an ironic smile, he added: "I've been wanting to pay you a visit for a long time, but I've been too busy . drinking . . ."

"Now, now! None of that! None of your jokes, you skinny devil! I'll give it to you hot if you don't look out! . . . What! Do you intend to go robbing in the streets and houses now?"

"Whatever for? There's plenty of stuff lying about here. Plenty I tell you, Semyonich! I hear you've swiped another two bales of cloth! Take care, Semyonich! See

you don't get caught!"

Semyonich trembled with indignation, foamed at the mouth, and tried to say something Chelkash released his hand and calmly made for the dark gates in long, regular strides. The guard kept close on his heels, swearing like a trooper.

Chelkash brightened up and whistled a merry tune through his teeth With his hands in his trouser pockets he strode along unhesitatingly, throwing biting quips and jests to right and left and getting paid in his own coin

"Hey, Grishka! Look how the bosses are taking care of you!" shouted a dock labourer from a crowd of men who were sprawling on the ground, resting after dinner

"I've no boots on, so Semyonich is seeing that I don't step onto something sharp and hurt my foot," answered Chelkash

They reached the gates Two soldiers ran their hands down Chelkash's clothes and then gently pushed him into the street

Chelkash crossed the road and sat down on the curbstone opposite a tavern A file of loaded carts came rattling out of the dock gates Another, of empty carts, came from the opposite direction, their drivers bumping on the seats. The docks belched forth a howling thunder and clouds of biting dust

Chelkash felt in his element amidst this frenzied bustle. Solid gains, requiring little labour but much skill, smiled in prospect for him He was confident of his skill, and wrinkling his eyes he pictured to himself the spree he would have next morning when his pockets were filled with bank notes He thought of his chum, Mishka; he would have been very useful to him that night if he had not broken his leg He swore to himself as doubt crossed his mind as to whether he would be able to manage alone, without Mishka. He wondered what the weather would be like at night, and looked at the sky He lowered his eyes and glanced down the street,

A half a dozen paces away, on the cobbles, leaning back

against the curb, sat a young lad in a coarse blue home-spun blouse and trousers of the same material, bast shoes on his feet, and a dilapidated brown cap on his head. Beside him lay a small knapsack and a scythe without a haft, wrapped in straw and carefully tied with string. The lad was broad-shouldered, thickset, fair-haired, and had a sunburnt weather-beaten face and large blue eyes, which looked at Chelkash trustfully and good-naturedly.

Chelkash bared his teeth, poked his tongue out, and pulling a horrible face, stared at the lad with wide-open eyes.

The lad blinked in perplexity at first, but soon he burst out laughing and shouted between his chuckles: "Aren't you funny!" And then, scarcely rising from the ground, he shifted awkwardly over to Chelkash, dragging his knapsack through the dust and rattling the heel of his scythe over the cobble-stones.

"Been on the booze, eh, brother?" he asked Chelkash, tugging at the latter's trousers.

"Yes, baby, something like that!" confessed Chelkash with a smile. He at once took a fancy to this sturdy good-natured lad with the bright childish eyes. "You've been out haymaking, eh?" he enquired.

"Yes! . . . But it was plenty of work and little pay. I made nothing by it. And the people! Hundreds of them! Those people from the famine districts came pouring in and knocked the price down. The job was hardly worth taking. In the Kuban they paid only sixty kopecks. Something awful! . . . And they say that before they used to pay three, four and five rubles!"

"Before! . . . Before they used to pay three rubles just to look at a Russian! I used to do this job myself about ten years ago. I would go to a stanitsa and say—I'm a Russian! And they'd look me up and down, feel my arms, shake their heads in wonder and say: 'Here, take three rubles!' And then they'd give you food and drink, and invite you to stay as long as you like!"

The lad listened to what Chelkash was saying with mouth wide open and amazement and admiration written on his round, tanned face, but soon he realized that the hobo was pulling his leg, and, smacking his lips, he burst into a hearty laugh Chelkash kept a straight face, hiding his smile under his moustache

"I'm a boob! You talk as if it was all true, and I listen to it and believe it . But, still, so help me God, things were better there before!"

"Well, and what am I saying? Ain't I saying that before things were "

"Stop kidding!" interrupted the boy with a wave of his hand "What are you, a shoemaker? Or a tailor? You, I mean "

"Me?" asked Chelkash in his turn, and after thinking for a moment, he said. "I'm a fisherman"

"A fish-er-man! Is that so! So you catch fish?"

"Fish! Why fish? The fishermen here don't only catch fish Mostly it's drowned bodies, lost anchors, sunken ships—things like that They have special hooks for this work "

"Yah! It's all lies! . They must be the fishermen they sing about in the song:

On arid shores

We spread our nets,

And barns and sheds we trawl

"Have you ever met fishermen like that?" asked Chelkash with a smile, looking hard at the boy.

"Met them? No, where could I have met them? But I've heard about them "

"What do you think of them?"

"That kind of fisherman, you mean? Well . they're not a bad lot They're free They have freedom . ."

"What's freedom to you? Do you like freedom?"

"What do you think? Be your own master Go where you like, do what you like . I should say so! You can keep yourself straight and have no milestone round your

neck. Have a good time, and nothing to worry about, except keep God in mind. What could be better?"

Chelkash spat contemptuously and turned his head away.

"With me it's like this," continued the boy. "My father's dead. We've only a patch of a farm. My mother's old. The land's all dried up. What can I do? I've got to live. But how? I don't know. I thinks to myself—I'll go and be a son-in-law in a good house. But what's the use? It would be all right if the father-in-law gave his daughter a share of his property, and we could set up for ourselves. But do you think he'd do that? Not a bit. The devil wants to keep it all for himself and expects me to slave for him for years! You see what I mean? But if I could earn a hundred or a hundred and fifty rubles, I'd be independent, and I'd say to the father-in-law—you can keep your property! If you give Marfa a share, all well and good. But if you don't . . . thank God she's not the only girl in the village! I'd be quite free. On my own . . . Y-e-s!" The boy heaved a deep sigh and went on to say: "But what can I do now? Nothing. I'll have to go and slave for a father-in-law. I thought I'd go to the Kuban and earn a couple of hundred rubles, and then everything would be all right. I'd be able to live like a gentleman. But I didn't make anything. So I'll have to go as a labourer after all . . . I'll never have my own farm now! Ah, well!"

It was quite evident that the lad was extremely reluctant to go as a son-in-law, for as he finished speaking his face became beclouded with grief and he squirmed as he lay on the ground.

Chelkash asked him:

"Where are you bound for now?"

"Home, of course! Where else?"

"How do I know? You might be bound for Turkey..."

"T-u-rkey!" drawled the boy in astonishment. "What Christians go to Turkey? That's a nice thing to say!"

"You're a fool!" said Chelkash, heaving a sigh and turning his head away again. This sturdy peasant lad stirred something in him.....

He became conscious of a vague, but steadily growing feeling of vexation gnawing at the pit of his stomach which prevented him from concentrating his mind on the task he had before him that night

Offended by the snub which had just been administered to him, the boy muttered something under his breath and now and again cast a sidelong glance at the hobo. He pouted his lips, puffed out his cheeks, and far too rapidly blinked his eyes in the most comical fashion. He was obviously disappointed at the conversation with this bewhiskered tramp having been brought to such an abrupt close

But the tramp paid no more attention to him. He sat on the curbstone engrossed in thought, whistling softly to himself, and beating time with his dirty, bare heel

The lad wanted to pay him out for the snub

"Hey, fisherman! Do you often go on the booze?" he began, but the "fisherman" suddenly turned his face towards him and asked:

"Listen, baby! Do you want to do a job of work with me tonight? Tell me quick!"

"What kind of job?" the lad asked suspiciously.

"What do you mean, what kind? Any kind I give you. We'll go fishing. You'll row the boat."

"Oh, all right. Not so bad. I don't mind taking a job. But . . . I won't get into trouble with you, will I? You're a dark one. There's no understanding you."

Chelkash again became conscious of a feeling like heart-burn rising in his chest. In a low voice of cold anger he said:

"Then don't chatter about what you don't understand .. If you're not careful I'll give you a crack over the head that'll make you understand."

His eyes flashed. He jumped up from the curbstone, twirled his moustache with the fingers of his left hand and clenched his right hand into a hard brawny fist

The boy was frightened. He glanced round rapidly, blinked timidly, and also sprang to his feet. The two stood looking each other up and down in silence

"Well!" asked Chelkash sternly. He was burning and trembling with rage at the insult he had received from this callow youth whom he had despised when talking to him, but whom he now hated because he had such a healthy, tanned face, bright blue eyes and short sturdy arms, and because he lived in a village somewhere, had a home there, and some rich farmer was asking him to be his son-in-law; because of his whole past and present, but most of all because this lad, who was only a baby compared with himself, dared to love freedom, the value of which he did not appreciate, and which he did not need. It is always unpleasant to see a man whom you regard as being inferior to and lower than yourself love or hate the same things that you love and hate and thereby resemble you.

The lad glared at Chelkash and felt that the latter was his master.

"Oh... I don't mind," he said, "I'm looking for a job, ain't I? It's all the same to me who I work for, you or somebody else. All I wanted to say was..... you don't look like a working man, you're ..er so ragged. Of course, I know it might happen to anybody. Lord, haven't I seen enough drunkards! Lots of them! And some even worse than you"

"All right, all right! So you agree?" Chelkash interrupted in a milder tone.

"Me? Why, of course! With pleasure! But how much will you pay me?"

"I pay according to results. It depends on the results. On the catch D'you understand? You might get a fiver. Will that be all right?"

Now that it was a question of money the peasant wanted to be definite, and he wanted his employer to be definite too. Again distrust and suspicion awoke in his mind.

"No, that doesn't suit me, brother!"

Chelkash also began to play the part.

"Don't argue. Wait! Let's go to the pub!" he said.

They walked down the street side by side. Chelkash twirled his moustache with the important air of an employer.

The lad's face expressed complete readiness to obey, and at the same time complete distrust and apprehension

"What's your name?" Chelkash asked him

"Gavrila," the boy answered.

When they entered the dingy smoke-begrimed tavern, Chelkash walked up to the bar and in the familiar tone of a frequenter ordered a bottle of vodka, some shchi, roast meat, and tea. When all this was served, he curtly said to the barman: "On tick!" The barman silently nodded his head. This scene impressed Gavrila and roused in him a profound respect for this man, his master, who was so well known and enjoyed such credit in spite of his disreputable appearance.

"Well, we'll have a bite now and then talk business. But wait here a moment, I have somewhere to go," said Chelkash.

He went out. Gavrila looked around him. The tavern was in a basement; it was damp and dismal, and a suffocating smell of vodka fumes, stale tobacco smoke, tar, and of some other pungent substance pervaded the place. At a table, opposite Gavrila, sat a redbearded drunken man in seaman's dress, covered from head to foot with coal dust and tar. Hiccoughing every now and again, he sang a song in twisted and broken words that sometimes sounded like a hiss and sometimes were deeply guttural. He was evidently not a Russian.

Behind him sat two Moldavian women, ragged, black-haired and sunburnt, and they too were drunkenly singing a song.

Out of the gloom other figures emerged, all strangely dishevelled, all half drunk, noisy and restless.

Gavrila began to feel afraid and longed for the return of his master. All the noises of the tavern merged in one monotonous tone, and it seemed as though some enormous beast was growling, as though, possessing hundreds of different voices, it was angrily and blindly struggling to get out of this stone pit, but was unable to find the exit. Gavrila felt as though his body was absorbing something intoxica-

ting and heavy, which made him dizzy and dimmed his eyes, which were roaming round the tavern with curiosity mixed with fear.....

Chelkash came back and they began to eat and drink, talking as they proceeded with their meal. After the third glass of vodka, Gavrila was drunk. He felt merry and wanted to say something to please his master, who was such a fine fellow and had given him this splendid treat. But the words which welled up in his throat in waves could not, for some reason, slip off his tongue, which had suddenly become so strangely heavy.

Chelkash looked at him and said with an ironic smile: "Half seas over already! Ekh, you milksop! What will you be like after the fifth glass? ... Will you be able to work?"

"Don't... be... afraid... brother," stammered Gavrila. "You'll... be... satisfied. I love you! Let me kiss you, eh?"

"Now then, none of that! Here, have another drink!"

Gavrila took another drink, and another, until everything around him began to float in even, undulating waves. This made him feel unwell and he wanted to vomit. His face looked foolishly solemn. When he tried to talk he smacked his lips in a comical way and mooed like a cow. Chelkash gazed at him absently, as if recalling something, thoughtfully twirling his moustache and smiling sadly.

The tavern rang with a drunken roar. The red-haired seaman was sleeping with his head resting on his elbows.

"All right, let's go," said Chelkash, getting up from the table.

Gavrila tried to get up too, but could not. He swore, and laughed idiotically as drunken men do.

"What a wash-out!" muttered Chelkash, resuming his seat at the table opposite Gavrila.

Gavrila kept on chuckling and gazing stupidly at his master. The latter stared back at him, keenly and thoughtfully. He saw before him a man whose life had fallen into his wolfish clutches. He felt that this life was in his power

to turn in any direction he pleased. He could crumple it like a playing card, or could help place it in a firm peasant groove. He felt that he was the other one's master, but through his mind ran the thought that this lad would never have to drain the cup of bitterness that fate had compelled him, Chelkash, to do . . He both envied and pitied this young life, he despised it, and was even conscious of a feeling of regret as he pictured the possibility of it falling into other hands like his own. But in the end all these feelings merged into one that was both paternal and practical. He was sorry for the lad, but he needed him. He took Gavrila under the armpits, lifted him up and gently prodding him from behind with his knee, he pushed him out into the tavern yard, laid him in the shade of a wood-pile, sat down beside him and lit his pipe. Gavrila wriggled about for a while, moaned, and fell asleep

II

"Are you ready?" Chelkash in an undertone asked Gavrila, who was fumbling with the oars

"In a minute! This rowlock's loose. Can I give it just one bang with the oar?"

"No! Don't make a sound! Force it down with your hand and it will slip into its place"

Both were noiselessly handling a boat that was moored to the stern of one of a whole flotilla of small sailing barges laden with oak staves, and of large Turkish feluccas laden with palm and sandal wood and thick cypress logs

The night was dark. Heavy banks of ragged clouds floated across the sky. The sea was calm. The water, black and thick, like oil, gave off a humid, saline smell and lazily lapped against the ship's sides and the beach, gently rocking Chelkash's boat. Far from the shore loomed the dark hulls of ships, their masts pointing to the sky, tipped with different coloured lights. The sea, reflecting these lights, was dotted with innumerable coloured patches, which shimmered on its soft, black, velvety surface. The sea was sound

asleep, like a labourer after a hard day's work.

"We're off!" said Gavrila, dropping his oars into the water.

"Aye, aye!" said Chelkash, pulling hard with his steering oar to bring the boat into the strip of water between the barges. The boat sped swiftly over the slippery water, and with each stroke of the oars the water was lit up with a bluish phosphorescent radiance that trailed like a long, soft, fluttering ribbon from the boat's stern.

"Does your head still ache?" Chelkash asked in a kindly voice.

"Something awful!..... It's ringing like a bell I'll splash some water over it in a minute."

"There's no need to do that. Take this. It'll help your inside, and you'll soon get better," said Chelkash, handing Gavrila a flask.

"I doubt it ... Well, God bless us. . ."

A soft gurgling sound was heard.

"Hey, you! That's enough!" said Chelkash, stopping the boy from drinking more.

The boat pushed ahead again, noiselessly and swiftly winding its way among the ships . . Suddenly it shot out from among the crowd of ships, and the sea—infinite and mighty—spread out before them into the blue distance, where mountains of clouds towered out of the water—some violet and grey with puffy yellow borders, others greenish, the colour of sea water, and others of a dull, leaden hue, of the kind which throw heavy, mournful shadows. The clouds moved slowly, now merging with and now skirting each other, mingling their colours and forms, absorbing each other and again emerging in new shapes, majestic and frowning..... There was something sinister in the slow movement of this soulless mass. It seemed as though over there, on the edge of the sea, their number was infinite, and that they would eternally creep across the sky in this indifferent manner with the malicious object of preventing it from shining again over the slumbering sea with its millions of golden eyes—the multi-coloured stars, living

and dreamily radiant, exciting lofty desires in men to whom their pure radiance is precious

"The sea's fine, isn't it?" asked Chelkash

"Not bad! Only it makes me feel afraid," answered Gavril, pulling strongly and steadily at the oars. The water was barely audible as it splashed under the strokes of the long oars and shone with the warm bluish light of phosphorus

"Afraid! You boob!" exclaimed Chelkash contemptuously.

He, the thief, loved the sea. His vibrating nervous nature, thirsting for impressions, could not contemplate enough the dark, boundless, free and mighty expanse. He felt hurt when he heard this answer to his enquiry about the beauty of the thing he loved. Sitting in the stern, he cleaved the water with his oar and calmly gazed ahead, feeling that he would like to glide far away over its velvety surface.

The sea always gave him a warm expansive feeling which filled his whole soul and purged it somewhat of the dross of everyday life. He appreciated this, and loved to see himself a better man, here, amidst the water and the air, where thoughts of life, and life itself, always lose, the former their painful acuteness, and the latter all value. At night, the sound of the sea's soft, breathing as it slept floats evenly over its surface, and this limitless sound fills a man's soul with serenity, and gently subduing its evil impulses, rouses in it mighty dreams.

"Where's the tackle?" Gavril suddenly asked, looking anxiously into the bottom of the boat.

Chelkash started

"The tackle? I've got it here, in the stern."

He felt ashamed at having to lie to this boy, and he also regretted the thoughts and feelings that had been disturbed by this boy's question. It made him angry. The familiar sense of burning rose in his breast and throat, and this irritated him still more.

"Now look here!" he said to Gavril in a hard, stern voice. "You sit still and mind your own business. I hired

you to row. Do the job I hired you for. If you wag your tongue too much, you 'll be sorry for it! Do you understand me?"

The boat shivered for a moment and stopped. The oars remained in the water, causing it to foam. Gavrila wriggled uncomfortably on his seat.

"Row!"

A foul oath shook the air. Gavrila swung back his oars. The boat shot forward, as if with fright, and sped on at a rapid, jerky pace, noisily cleaving the water.

"Steady now, steady!"

Chelkash stood up in the stern, and keeping hold of the steering oar, he glared coldly into Gavrila's pale face. Bending forward, he looked like a cat crouching for a spring. In his rage he ground his teeth so hard that it could be distinctly heard, and Gavrila's teeth, chattering with fear, were no less audible.

"Who's that shouting?" came a stern cry from the sea.

"Row! Row, you devil!.... Quieter! . . . I'll murder you, you dog!.... Go on!..... Row! .. One! Two! Make a sound, and I'll tear you limb from limb!" hissed Chelkash. And then he went on in a jeering tone: "Afraid! Booby!"

"Mother of God..... Holy Mary..." whispered Gavrila, trembling with fear and exertion.

The boat swung round smoothly and returned to the docks, where the ship's lights crowded in multi-coloured groups, and the tall masts were visible.

"Hey! Who's that shouting?" came the voice again, but it sounded more distant this time. Chelkash became calmer.

"It's you that's shouting," he said in answer to the distant voice, and then he turned to Gavrila, who was still muttering his prayers, and said: "Well, brother, you're lucky! If that devil had come after us, it would have been all up with you. Do you understand what I mean? I'd have put you over to feed the fishes!"

Chelkash now spoke calmly and even good-humouredly, but Gavrila still trembling with fear, begged of him:

"Let me go! I ask you in the name of Christ, let me go! Put me ashore somewhere! Ay-ay-ay! . . I'm lost! I'm a lost man! Remember God and let me go! What do you want me for? I'm no good for this sort of job. . . I've never been on one like this before This is the first time . Lord! I'm lost I'm lost! Christ, how you fooled me, brother, eh? It's a sin . You are damning your own soul! .. Some business . . ."

"What business?" Chelkash asked sternly. "What business, eh?"

The lad's fear amused him, and he delighted in it as well as in the thought of what a terrible fellow he, Chelkash, was

"Shady business, brother! Let me go, for God's sake! What do you want me for? . Please . Be good . . ."

"Shut up! If I didn't need you, I wouldn't have taken you Do you understand?. . Well, shut up!"

"Lord!" sighed Gavrila.

"Stop snivelling, or you'll get it in the neck!" snapped Chelkash

But Gavrila, unable to restrain himself any longer, sobbed quietly, wept, sniffed, wriggled on his seat, but rowed strongly, desperately.

The boat shot forward like an arrow Again the dark hulls of the ships loomed before them, and soon the boat was lost among them, winding like a shuttle in and out of the narrow strips of water between them

"Now listen! If anybody asks you about anything, you're to keep mum, if you want to keep alive, that is! Do you understand me?"

"Ekh!" sighed Gavrila resignedly in answer to this stern command. Then he added bitterly: "I'm done for, I am!"

"Stop snivelling, I tell you!" said Chelkash in an angry whisper.

This whisper robbed Gavrila of all capacity to think; his mind was benumbed by a chill foreboding of evil He

mechanically dropped the oars, leaned far back, raised the oars and dropped them again, all the time keeping his eyes riveted on the tips of his bast shoes.

The sleepy murmur of the waves sounded angry and terrifying. They entered the docks From beyond its granite walls came sounds of human voices, the splashing of water, singing and shrill whistling.

"Stop!" whispered Chelkash "Ship your oars! Hold on to the wall! Quieter, you devil!"

Gavrilà clutched at the wall and worked the boat along; the thick coating of slime that covered the masonry deadened the sound of the gunwale as it scraped along its side.

"Stop! ... Give me the oars! Come this way! Where's your passport? In your knapsack? Give me your knapsack! Look sharp! That's to prevent your running away, my friend You won't run away now. You might have bolted without the oars, but you'd be afraid to run away without your passport. Wait here! Mind! If you blab—I'll find you even if you're at the bottom of the sea!"

Suddenly clutching at something with his hands, Chelkash leaped upwards and vanished over the wall

Gavrilà shuddered. All this had happened so quickly. He felt the accursed burden of fear which weighed upon him in the presence of this bewhiskered, skinny thief, dropping, slipping off his shoulders Here was a chance to get away! ... He breathed a sigh of relief and looked around. On the left towered a black, mastless hull; it looked like an enormous coffin, deserted and empty ... Every wave that struck its side awoke a hollow, muffled echo that sounded like a sigh. On the right, the grey stone wall of the mole stretched above the surface of the water, like a cold, heavy serpent. Behind him loomed some black piles, and in front, in the space between the wall and the coffin, he could see the sea, silent, desolate, and the black clouds floating above it. The clouds moved across the sky slowly, large and ponderous, spreading horror out of the darkness and seeming ready to crush one with their weight. All was cold, black and sinister. Gavrilà grew frightened again,

and this fright was worse than that with which Chelkash imbued him; it gripped his breast in its powerful embrace, reduced him to a helpless clod and held him fast to the seat of the boat.

Silence reigned all around. Not a sound was heard, except for the sighing of the sea. The clouds still crept across the sky slowly and lazily, but they rose out of the sea in infinite numbers. The sky too looked like a sea, but a restless one, suspended over the calm, smooth and slumbering sea below. The clouds seemed to be descending upon the earth in grey, curly waves, into the chasms from which the wind had torn them, and upon the newly-rising waves, not yet crested with angry greenish foam.

Gavrila felt crushed by this gloomy silence and beauty and yearned to see his master again. Suppose he didn't come back? Time passed slowly, more slowly than the clouds creeping across the sky. And as time passed the silence became more sinister... At last the sounds of splashing and rustling and something resembling a whisper came from the other side of the mole. Gavrila thought he would die on the spot.

"P'st! Are you asleep? Hold this... Careful now!" It was Chelkash's muffled voice.

Something heavy and cube-shaped dropped from the wall. Gavrila caught it and put it in the bottom of the boat. A second object of the same kind followed. And then Chelkash's tall figure appeared over the wall, the oars appeared out of somewhere, Gavrila's knapsack fell at his feet, and breathing heavily, Chelkash slipped into the stern of the boat.

Gavrila gazed at him with a pleased but timid smile. "Are you tired?" he asked.

"Yes, a bit! Now then take to the oars and pull! Pull with all your might! You've done well, my lad! Half the job's done. The only thing now is to slip past those devils out there—and then you can get your share and go home to your Masha. I suppose you have a Masha, haven't you?"

"N-no!" answered Gavrila, pulling at the oars with all his might. His chest heaved like a pair of bellows and

his arms worked like steel springs. The water swirled from under the boat's keel, and the blue track at its stern was wider now. Gavrila was drenched with his own perspiration, but he continued to row with all his might. Twice that night he had had a terrible fright; he did not wish to have a third one. All he longed for was to get over this accursed job as quickly as possible, to go ashore and run away from this man before he did indeed kill him, or get him landed in jail. He decided not to discuss anything with him, not to contradict him, to do all he told him to do, and if he succeeded in escaping from him, to offer a prayer to St Nicholas the Miracle-Worker the very next morning. An ardent prayer was ready to burst from his breast at this very moment, but he restrained himself. He puffed like a steam engine and now and again glanced at Chelkash from under his brows.

But Chelkash, tall, thin, his body bent forward, looking like a bird ready to take to flight, peered with hawkish eyes into the darkness ahead and twitched his beak-like nose. He grasped the steering oar tightly with one hand and with the other twirled his moustache, which also twitched from the smiles that twisted his thin lips. He was pleased with his haul, with himself, and with this lad who was so terribly frightened of him, and whom he had converted into his slave. He watched Gavrila putting everyounce of strength into his oars and felt sorry for him. He wanted to cheer him up.

"Hey!" he said softly with a laugh. "You were frightened, weren't you?"

"N-no! Not much," gasped Gavrila.

"You needn't pull so hard now. It's all over. There's only one spot that we've got to pass Take a rest...."

Gavrila obediently stopped rowing, wiped the perspiration from his face with his sleeve and dropped the oars.

"Well, have another go now," said Chelkash after a little while. "But don't make the water talk. There's a gate we have to pass. Quietly now, quietly! They're a stern lot here They wouldn't hesitate to shoot and bore a hole in your head before you have time to shout—oh!"

The boat now glided slowly over the water making scarcely a sound, except for the blue drops that dripped from the oars and caused small, blue, momentary patches to form on the water where they fell. The night became darker and even more silent. The sky no longer resembled a storm-tossed sea—the clouds had spread and covered it with a smooth heavy blanket that hung low and motionless over the water. The sea became still calmer and blacker, its warm saline odour became still more pungent, and it no longer seemed as broad as it was before.

"I wish it would rain!" whispered Chelkash. "We'd get through as if we were behind a curtain."

On the right and left eerie structures loomed out of the black water—barges, motionless, gloomy, and also black. But on one of them a light was moving; evidently somebody carrying a lantern was walking on the deck. The sea sounded plaintive and hollow, as it lapped against the sides of the barges, and the barges answered with a cold, muffled echo, as if arguing with the sea and refusing to yield to its plaint.

"A cordon!" exclaimed Chelkash in a scarcely audible whisper.

The moment Chelkash told him to row more slowly, Gavrila was again overcome by that feeling of tense expectation. He bent forward and peered into the darkness, and he felt as if he were growing, as if his bones and sinews were stretching within him, giving him a dull pain; his head, filled with but one thought, ached; the skin on his back quivered, and small, sharp, cold needles were shooting through his legs. His eyes ached from the tenseness with which he peered into the darkness, out of which, every moment, he expected to hear the cry: "Stop, thief!"

And now, when Chelkash whispered "cordon," Gavrila shuddered; a piercing, burning thought shot through his brain and sent his taut nerves tingling. He wanted to shout and call for help. He opened his mouth, rose slightly from the seat, stuck out his chest and took a deep breath—but suddenly he was paralysed by fear, which

struck him like a whip. He closed his eyes and collapsed in the bottom of the boat.

Ahead of the boat, far away on the horizon, out of the black water, an enormous, fiery-blue sword rose and cleaved the darkness of the night; it ran its edge over the clouds and then lay on the breast of the sea, a broad blue strip. And within this bright strip ships appeared out of the darkness, ships hitherto invisible, black, silent, and shrouded in the solemn gloom of the night. They looked as though they had long been at the bottom of the sea, sent there by the mighty power of the storm, and had now risen at the command of the fiery sword that was born of the sea—had risen to look at the sky and at everything that was on the water..... Their rigging, clinging to their masts like festoons of seaweed brought up from the sea bottom together with the black giants who were enmeshed in their net. The sinister blue sword rose again out of the depth of the sea and flashing, again cleaved the night, and again lay flat on the water, but in another direction. And where it lay, other ships' hulls, hitherto invisible, appeared.

The boat stopped and rocked on the water as if in perplexity. Gavrila lay in the bottom of the boat, his face covered with his hands. Chelkash jabbed at him with his foot and hissed furiously:

“That’s the Customs cruiser, you fool . . . It’s an electric lamp! Get up, you dolt! They’ll shine the light on us in a minute and everything will be all up with you and me! Get up!”

At last a kick from the heel of a heavy top boot heavier than the first caught Gavrila in the back. He started up, and still afraid to open his eyes, took his seat, groped for the oars and began to row.

“Quieter! Quieter, or I’ll murder you! . . . What a dolt you are, the devil take you! What frightened you, ugly mug? A lantern, that’s all it is! Quieter with the oars. . . you sour-faced devil . . . They’re on the lookout for smugglers. They won’t see us—they’re too far out. Don’t be afraid, they won’t see us. Now we.....” Chelkash looked

round triumphantly. "Of course! We're out of it! Phew! .. Well, you're lucky, you thick-headed boob!"

Gavrila said nothing. He pulled at the oars and, breathing heavily, looked out of the corners of his eyes in the direction where the fiery sword was rising and falling. He could not possibly believe what Chelkash said—that this was only a lantern. The cold blue radiance that cleaved the darkness caused the sea to sparkle with mysterious silvery brilliance, and Gavrila again felt hypnotized by that soul-crushing fear. He rowed mechanically, crouching as if expecting a blow from above, and now he was bereft of all desire—he was empty and soulless. The excitement of this night had driven everything human out of him.

But Chelkash was jubilant. His nerves, accustomed to shocks, were now relaxed. His moustache twitched voluptuously and a light shone in his eyes. He felt splendid. He whistled through his teeth, inhaled deep breaths of the moist sea air. He looked around, and smiled good-naturedly when his eyes fell upon Gavrila.

The wind swept down and chopped up the sea. The clouds were now thinner and less opaque, but they covered the whole sky. The wind, though still light, was freely sweeping over the sea, but the clouds were motionless and seemed to be absorbed in grey, dull thought.

"Now lad, it's time you pulled yourself together! You look as if all your guts have been squeezed out of your body and there's nothing left but a bag of bones! It's all over now. Hey!"

Gavrila was pleased to hear a human voice at last, even if that voice was Chelkash's.

"I can hear what you say," he said softly.

"Very well, then, milksop . . . Come and steer and I'll take the oars I suppose you're tired."

Gavrila mechanically changed places with Chelkash, and as they crossed, Chelkash saw the boy's woe-begone face, and he noticed that his legs were trembling. He felt sorry for him. Patting him on the shoulder, he said:

"Come on, lad! Don't be so down in the dumps. You've

earned a good bit tonight. I'll reward you well, my boy. Would you like the feel of a twenty-five ruble bill?"

"I don't want anything. All I want is to get ashore....."

Chelkash waved his hand in disgust, spat, took up the oars and began to row, swinging the oars far back with his long arms.

The sea woke up and began to play with its little waves giving birth to them, ornamenting them with fringes of foam, dashing them against each other, and breaking them up into fine spray. The foam melted with hisses and sighs and the air all around was filled with a musical splashing noise. Even the darkness seemed to come to life.

Chelkash began to talk

"Well now, tell me," he said. "You'll go back to your village and get married, and start grubbing the earth and sow corn. The wife will start bearing children. You won't have enough food for them. Well, you'll be struggling all your life... Is there any pleasure in that?"

"Pleasure! I should say there isn't!" answered Gavrila with a shudder

Here and there the wind rent the clouds apart and scraps of the sky with one or two stars in them peeped between the spaces. Reflected in the sea, these stars played among the waves, now vanishing and now twinkling again.

"Steer to the right!" said Chelkash, "we shall be there soon... Y-e-ss!... We're finished. It was a nice job. D'you see how it is... One night's work, and we land a cool five hundred!"

"Fi-v-e hundred!" drawled Gavrila incredulously. But he at once caught fright and hurriedly asked, kicking one of the bales at the bottom of the boat: "What's this?"

"That's worth a lot of money. If we sold it at its proper price we could get a thousand for it. But I'll ask for less..... Clever, ain't it?"

"Y-e-s?" drawled Gavrila interrogatingly. "I wish I could get a bag like that!" he added with a sigh as he suddenly remembered his village, his wretched farm, his

mother, and all that was distant and dear to him, and for the sake of which he had left home to earn some money, and had gone through all the horrors of this night. He was overwhelmed by a wave of recollections of his little village which scrambled down the steep slope to the river that was concealed by birches, willows, ash, and bird cherry . . . "Wouldn't that be fine," he murmured with a mournful sigh

"Y-e-s!" continued Chelkash. "I'm thinking how nice it would be for you now to take the train home . . . Wouldn't you have all the girls running after you! You could choose any one you liked! You could build yourself a new house I don't think you'll have enough to build a new one though "

"That's true it won't be enough to build a house Timber's dear in our parts "

"Well, you could repair the old one What about a horse? Have you got one?"

"A horse! Yes, I've got a horse, but she's too old, the devil "

"Well, you could buy a horse Ekh, a f-i-n-e horse! And a cow sheep and poultry Eh?"

"Oh, don't talk about it! . Good Lord! Wouldn't I live then!"

"Y-e-s, brother, it wouldn't be at all bad I've got some idea of what that kind of life is I had my own little nest once My father was one of the richest men in our village "

Chelkash lazily pulled at the oars The boat rocked on the waves that were playfully lapping against its sides, barely moving over the dark sea which was becoming more and more boisterous The two men dreamed as they rocked on the water, thoughtfully gazing around. Wishing to soothe the lad and cheer him up, Chelkash had turned Gavrila's thoughts to his village and had begun the talk in a bantering tone, hiding his smile under his moustache. When questioning Gavrila and reminding him of the joys of pea-

sant life, in which he himself had long been disillusioned, had forgotten and had only recalled now he gradually allowed himself to be carried away by this new train of thought He stopped questioning the lad about his village and its affairs, and, before he was aware of it, continued in the following strain:

“The main thing in peasant life, brother, is freedom! You’re your own master. You have a house. It’s not worth much, but it’s your own. You have land; only a patch, but it’s your own! You are a king on your land! You have a face .. You can demand respect from everybody . Isn’t that so?” he concluded feelingly.

Gavrila stared at him with curiosity, and he too was carried away by the same feeling In the course of this conversation he forgot the kind of man he was dealing with and saw before him a peasant, like himself, stuck to the land forever by the sweat of many generations, bound to it by the recollections of childhood, but who had voluntarily run away from it and its cares, and was suffering due punishment for this truancy.

“Yes, brother, what you say is true!” he said “Oh how true! Look at yourself. What are you now without land? Land is like a mother you can’t forget it so easily.”

Chelkash awoke from his musing... . He was conscious of that irritating heartburn which he always felt whenever his pride—the pride of the reckless daredevil—was touched by anybody, particularly by one whom he despised

“Stop sermonizing!” he said fiercely. “Did you think I was talking seriously? . You must take me for a fool!”

“You’re a funny chap!” Gavrila blurted out, feeling crushed again. “I wasn’t talking about you, was I? There’s lots of men like you Lots of them! Ekh! How many unhappy people there are in the world! ... Roaming around!.....”

“Here, come and take the oars, you boob!” commanded Chelkash, for some reason restraining the flood of oaths that came rushing up into his throat.

They changed places again, and as he stepped over the

bales in the bottom of the boat to reach the stern, Chelkash felt an almost irresistible desire to give Gavrila a push that would send him tumbling into the sea

The conversation was not resumed, but Chelkash felt the breath of the village even in Gavrila's silence. Musing over the past, he forgot to steer, with the result that the boat, turned, by current, drifted out to sea. The waves seemed to understand that the boat had lost its way and began to toss it higher and higher, lightly playing with it, causing kindly blue lights to flash under the oars. And before Chelkash's mental vision floated pictures of the past, of the distant past which was separated from the present by a wall of eleven years of hobo life. He saw himself as a child; he saw his village; his mother, a plump ruddy-cheeked woman with kind grey eyes, he saw his father, a red-bearded giant with a stern face; he saw himself as a bridegroom, and he saw his wife, black eyed Anfisa, a soft, buxom, cheerful girl with a long plait of hair; he saw himself again as the handsome Guardsman, again he saw his father, now grey and bent by toil, and his mother wrinkled and bowed; he also saw the vision of his return to his village from the army, and how proud his father was of his Grigori, of this handsome, sturdy, bewhiskered soldier. Memory, that scourge of the unhappy, reanimates even the stones of the past, and even pours a drop of honey into the poison that one had once to drink.

Chelkash felt as if he were being fanned by the tender soothing breath of his native air, which wafted to his ears the kind words of his mother, the grave speech of his earnest peasant father, many forgotten sounds and many fragrant smells of mother earth which has only just thawed, which has only just been ploughed, and is only just being covered with the emerald silken carpet of winter wheat. He felt lonely, uprooted and isolated forever from the way of life which had produced the blood that now flowed in his veins.

"Hey! Where are we going?" suddenly exclaimed Gavrila.

Chelkash started and looked round with the alert gaze of a bird of prey.

"Christ, look where we have drifted to! Lay to the oars! Pull! Pull harder!"

"You've been dreaming, eh," Gavrila asked with a smile.

"I'm tired .. ."

"So now we won't get caught with these, will we?" Gavrila asked, kicking at the bales at the bottom of the boat.

"No You can ease your mind on that score. I'll deliver them and get the money .. . Y-e-s!"

"Five hundred?"

"No less."

"A tidy sum! Wish I had it! Ekh, wouldn't I play a tune with it!"

"On the farm?"

"I should say so! I'd . . ."

And Gavrila flew off on winged dreams Chelkash remained silent. His moustache drooped; his right side, splashed by the spray, was dripping wet His eyes were now sunken and had lost their brightness Everything rapacious in him had sagged, subdued by humiliating thoughts, which were reflected even from the folds of his grimy blouse

He swung the boat round abruptly and steered towards something black that loomed out of the water.

The sky was again overcast and rain fell, a fine, warm rain, which pattered merrily as the drops struck the backs of the waves.

"Stop! Be quiet!" commanded Chelkash.

The boat's nose struck the side of a barge.

"Are they asleep, or what, the devils?" growled Chelkash, catching hold with a boat hook of some ropes that were dangling from the deck. "Drop the ladder! Blast it! It must go and rain now! Why couldn't it have rained before! Hey, you swabs! Hey!"

"Is that you, Selkash?" came a voice from above that sounded like the mewing of a cat.

"Come on, drop the ladder!"

"Kalimera, Selkash!"

"Drop the ladder, you hell-smoked devil!" roared Chelkash.

"Oh how angry he eez tonight . . Eloy!"

"Up you go, Gavrila!" said Chelkash to his mate.

Within a moment they were on the deck, where three darkbearded figures were animatedly chattering to each other in a strange lisping tongue and looking over the gunwale down at Chelkash's boat. A fourth, wrapped in a long chlamys, went up to Chelkash, silently shook hands with him, and then glanced suspiciously at Gavrila.

"Get the money by the morning," said Chelkash to him curtly. "I'll turn in now. Come on, Gavrila! Do you want anything to eat?"

"All I want is to sleep . . ." answered Gavrila, and five minutes later he was snoring, while Chelkash, sitting beside him, was trying on somebody's top boot, pensively spitting on the side and whistling a mournful tune through his teeth. Then he stretched out beside Gavrila, put his hands under the back of his head and lay there, twitching his moustache.

The barge rocked gently on the playful water. Something creaked plaintively. The rain pattered softly on the deck. The waves splashed against the side of the barge . . . And it all sounded so sad, like a cradle song sung by a mother who had no hopes of happiness for her son.

Chelkash bared his teeth, raised his head, looked around, whispered something to himself, and lay down again . . . He spread out his legs, and this made him look like a huge pair of scissors.

III

He woke up first, looked around anxiously, calmed down at once and looked at Gavrila who was still sleeping, snoring lustily, with a smile spread all over his boyish, healthy, sunburnt face. Chelkash sighed and climbed up a narrow

rope ladder. A patch of leaden sky peered down the hatchway. It was already light, but the day was dull and grey, as it usually is in the autumn.

Chelkash returned about two hours later. His face was flushed and his moustaches were dashingly screwed upward. He wore a tunic and buckskin breeches, and a pair of tall, stout top boots. He looked like a huntsman. Although not new, the costume was still sound and suited him well. It made him look broader, concealed his gauntness and gave him a martial appearance.

"Hey, you calf, get up!" he cried, pushing Gavrila with his foot.

Gavrila jumped up. Still half asleep; he failed to recognize Chelkash and stared at him with dull, sleepish eyes. Chelkash burst out laughing.

"You do look fine!" exclaimed Gavrila at last, with a broad smile. "Quite a gentleman!"

"That doesn't take long with us. Well, aren't you a frightened baby! You thought you were going to die a thousand times last night, didn't you?"

"Yes, but judge for yourself. It was the first time I was on a job like that! I might have damned my soul for the rest of my life!"

"Would you come with me again?"

"Again?.... Well..... What can I say? What will I get out of it? Tell me that!"

"Well, suppose you'd get two rainbow ones?"

Two hundred rubles? That's not so bad..... I'd go for that... "

"But wait a minute! What about damning your soul?"

"Well..... perhaps . . . it won't be damned!" answered Gavrila with a smile. And if it won't..... I'll be a made man for life."

Chelkash laughed merrily and said:

"All right! Enough of joking, let's go ashore....."

They were in the boat again Chelkash at the tiller and Gavrila at the oars. Above them was the grey sky, evenly overcast with clouds. The dull green sea played with the

oat, boisterously tossing it on its waves, which were still merrily casting bright salty sprays into the boat. Far ahead loomed a yellow strip of sandy shore, and behind them stretched the vast expanse of the sea, furrowed by packs of waves that were ornamented with fluffy white foam. There, too, in the distance, were numerous ships; far on the left was visible a whole forest of masts, and the white houses of the town, whence came a muffled rumble which, mingling with the splashing of the waves, created fine, powerful music. And over all was cast a thin film of grey mist, which made things seem remote from each other.

"Ekh! There'll be hell let loose this evening!" said Chelkash, nodding in the direction of the sea,

"A storm?" asked Gavrila, ploughing the waves with powerful strokes. He was already drenched from head to foot from the spray which the wind scattered over the sea.

"That's it!" said Chelkash.

Gavrila looked into his face enquiringly.

"Well, how much did they give you?" he asked at last, realizing that Chelkash was not inclined to talk.

"Look!" said Chelkash, showing Gavrila something that he drew from his pocket.

Gavrila saw a roll of coloured bills, and his eyes lit up with joy.

"Ekh! . . . And I thought you were kidding me! How much have you got there?"

"Five hundred and forty!"

"My word!" exclaimed Gavrila in a whisper, following the five hundred and forty rubles with his greedy eyes as Chelkash put the money back into his pocket. "Ekh! If only I had as much as that!"—and he heaved a mournful sigh.

"Won't we have a wonderful time, my lad!" exclaimed Chelkash cheerfully. "Ekh, we'll go on the spree! . . . Don't worry! You'll get your share . . . I'll give you forty Does that satisfy you? I'll give it to you right now if you want to?"

"If it's not too much for you . . . Why not? I'll take it!"

Gavrila trembled with the expectation that gnawed in his breast

"Oh, you devil's baby! I'll take it, you say! Well, take it, please! Do me a favour! I don't know what to do with all this money! Help me to get rid of it. Take it, do!"

Chelkash held out several bills Gavrila took them with a trembling hand, dropped the oars and tucked the bills inside his blouse, greedily screwing up his eyes and inhaling noisily, as if he were drinking something very hot. Chelkash watched him with an ironic smile. Gavrila again took up the oars and rowed with downcast eyes nervously, hurriedly, as if afraid of something. His shoulders and ears twitched.

"You're greedy!..... That's bad... .. But it's not surprising ... You're a peasant . . ." said Chelkash pensively.

"But look what you can do with money!" exclaimed Gavrila, aflush with excitement; and he began to talk rapidly, hurriedly, as if trying to catch up with his thoughts and clutching at words, about life in the village with money and without money, about the honour, abundance and pleasure one can acquire with money

Chelkash listened attentively, with a grave face and eyes screwed up as if thinking hard. Now and again he smiled with satisfaction

"Here we are!" he exclaimed, interrupting Gavrila

A wave lifted the boat and landed it on the sandy beach.

"Well, it's all over now, brother. Pull the boat up higher so that it won't be washed away. They'll come for it. And now we must part!..... It's eight versts from here to town. I suppose you are going back to town, aren't you?"

A shrewd, good-natured smile lit up Chelkash's face, and his whole bearing indicated that he had thought of something pleasing to himself and surprising for Gavrila. Thrusting his hands in his pocket, he rustled the bills that were lying in them.

"No . . . I..... won't go..... I." gasped Gavrila as if he were choking.

Chelkash looked at him and asked:

"What's ailing you?"

"Nothing . . . only . . ." Gavrila's face was alternately flushed and ashen-grey, and he stood there wriggling, whether from a desire to hurl himself upon Chelkash, or because he was torn by another desire difficult to fulfill, it was hard to say.

Chelkash felt uneasy at the sight of the lad's agitation and he waited to see what the upshot of it would be

Gavrila began to laugh in a queer way that sounded more like sobbing. He hung his head, so that Chelkash was unable to see the expression on his face; only his ears were visible, and these grew red and pale by turns

"Go to the devil!" exclaimed Chelkash, waving his hand in disgust. "Have you fallen in love with me, or what? Stands there wriggling like a girl! Or is it that you don't want to part from me? Now then, you boob! Speak up, or else I'll go away!"

"You'll go away?" shrieked Gavrila

The sandy, deserted beach shuddered at the sound of this shriek, and the sandy ridges washed up by the waves of the sea seemed to heave. Chelkash too shuddered. Suddenly Gavrila darted towards Chelkash, threw himself at his feet and flinging his arms around his knees gave a sudden tug. Chelkash staggered and dropped heavily to the sand. Grinding his teeth, he raised his long arm and was about to bring his clenched fist down upon Gavrila's head when the blow was checked by the lad's shy and plaintive whisper:

"Be a good fellow! . . . Give me that money! For the sake of Christ, give it to me! It isn't much to you. You got it in one night. Only one night, but it would take me years. Give it to me, and I will pray for you! Always . . . In three churches I'll pray for the salvation of your soul! You will only throw the money away . . . But I, I'd put it in the land! Give me the money! It isn't much to you. You can easily get some more. One night and you are rich! Do me a good turn. After all, you're a lost man . . . There's nothing before you. But . . . I . . . Oh..... What couldn't I do with the money! Give it to me!"

Chelkash sat on the sand, frightened, amazed and angry, leaning back and propping himself up with his arms, saying not a word, but staring with wide open eyes at the lad who was pressing his head against his knees and whispering, gasping and pleading. At last he pushed the boy away, jumped to his feet, thrust his hand in his pocket, took out several bills and flung them at Gavrila

"Here you are! Take them." he shouted, trembling with excitement, filled with both intense pity and hatred for this greedy slave. And having thrown the money at him, he felt like a hero

"I wanted to give you more myself," he said "My heart was softened last night, thinking of my village. . . I thought to myself: I'll help the lad. I just waited to see what you would do, whether you would ask for it or not. But you .. . Ekh! You've got no guts! You're a beggar! . . . Is it worth while tormenting yourself like that for money? Fool! Greedy devils! .. They've no self respect .. They'd sell themselves for five kopecks! ..

"Angel!.... May Christ guard and save you! I'm a different man now.... . I'm rich!" squealed Gavrila, in a transport of joy, putting the money inside his blouse with a trembling hand "You are an angel!.... . I shall never forget you, not as long as I live!.. . And I'll tell my wife and my children to pray for you!"

Hearing these rapturous cries and seeing the lad's radiant face distorted by this paroxysm of greed, Chelkash felt that he, a thief, a rake, torn from all his kith and kin, would never become a greedy, low, self-degrading creature like this No! He would never sink so low!. And this thought and feeling, making him conscious of his own freedom, kept him on the deserted seashore with Gavrila

"You've made me happy for life!" shouted Gavrila again, seizing Chelkash's hand and pressing it against his own face.

Chelkash remained silent, baring his teeth like a wolf. Gavrila kept on chattering:

"And just imagine! As we were coming here I was thinking to myself: I'll give him, meaning you, one c-r-r-a-c-k over the head with the oar ... take the money, and chuck him, meaning you, into the sea. Nobody would miss him I thought to myself. And even if he was missed, nobody would worry about him. He's not the kind of man anybody would make a fuss about! ... No use to anybody. Who would stand up for him?!"

"Chelkash seized Gavrila by the throat and barked:
"Give that money back!"

Gavrila struggled, but Chelkash's other arm wound round him like a snake. There was a screech of tearing cloth, and Gavrila lay on the sand kicking his legs, his blouse ripped down to the hem, his eyes staring with wild amazement and his fingers clutching the air. Chelkash stood there, tall, straight, thin, with a rapacious look on his face. Baring his teeth he laughed a staccato, sardonic laugh, while his moustache twitched nervously on his sharp angular face. Never in all his life had he been so cruelly insulted, and never had he been so angry.

"Well, are you happy?" he asked Gavrila amidst his laughter. And then, turning his back on him, he strode off in the direction of the town. But he had barely taken half a dozen paces when Gavrila crouched like a cat, jumped to his feet, and with a wide swing of his arm hurled a large pebble at Chelkash, exclaiming fiercely:

"Take that!"

Chelkash gasped, put his hands to his head, staggered, swung round to face Gavrila and fell prone on the sand. Gavrila gazed at the prostrate man dumbfounded. He saw his leg move, he saw him try to raise his head and then stretch out and tremble like a taut string. And then Gavrila dashed off, as fast as his legs could carry him, into the distance, where a shaggy black cloud hung over the misty steppe, and where it was dark. The waves surged up on the sandy beach, merged with it and surged back again. The surf hissed, and the air was filled with spray.

Rain fell at first slowly, but soon in heavy dense streaks,

pouring down from the sky. And the streaks wove an entire net of water threads, a net which at once covered the expanses of steppe and sea. Gavrila vanished in this net. For a long time nothing was visible except the rain, and the long body of the man lying on the sand on the seashore. But out of the rain Gavrila reappeared, running as fast as a bird upon the wing. He ran up to Chelkash, dropped to his knees in front of him and turned him over on the sand. His hand came in contact with something warm, red and sticky ... He shuddered and started back with horror written on his pallid face.

"Brother, get up!" he whispered into Chelkash's ear amidst the patterning of the rain.

Chelkash came to, pushed Gavrila away and said in a hoarse voice:

"Go away!..."

"Brother! forgive me! It was the devil who tempted me. . ." whispered Gavrila in a trembling voice, kissing Chelkash's hand.

"Go . . . Go away . . ." gasped Chelkash

"Take this sin from my soul! . Please! Forgive!..."

"For Go away! Go to hell!" Chelkash suddenly shouted, sitting up. His face was pale and angry, his eyes were dull and heavy, and the lids drooped as if he very much wanted to sleep. "What else do you want? You've done your job... Now go! Clear out!"

And he lunged at grief-stricken Gavrila with his foot, but the effort was too much for him, and he would have sunk back to the sand had not Gavrila put his arm round his shoulders. Chelkash's face was now on a level with Gavrila's. Both were pale and horrible to look at.

"Pht!" and Chelkash spat into his hireling's wide-open eyes. Gavrila wiped his eyes with his sleeve and whispered:

"Do what you like.. I shan't say a word. Forgive me, for the sake of Christ!"

"Worm!..... You haven't got guts for anything!" shouted Chelkash contemptuously, and then, tearing his blouse from under his coat, he began silently to bandage

his head, now and again grinding his teeth with pain. At last he said through his clenched teeth, "Did you take the money?"

"No, I didn't take it, brother! I don't want it! It only causes trouble! . . ."

Chelkash put his hand into the pocket of his coat, drew out the roll of bills, took a rainbow-coloured one from it and put it back in his pocket, and threw the rest at Gavrila, saying:

"Take this and clear out!"

"I won't take it, brother! . . . I can't! Forgive me!"

"Take it, I tell you!" roared Chelkash, rolling his eyes horribly.

"Forgive me . . . and then I'll take it . . ." said Gavrila timidly, dropping down on the rain-drenched sand at Chelkash's feet.

"Liar! You will take it! I know you will, you worm!" said Chelkash in a confident voice. Pulling Gavrila's head up by the hair, he pushed the money into his face and said.

"Take it! Take it! You've earned it! Take it! Don't be afraid! Don't be ashamed of having nearly killed a man! Nobody would punish you for getting rid of a man like me. They would even thank you for it if they got to know of it. Take it!"

Seeing that Chelkash was joking, Gavrila felt relieved. He grasped the money tightly in his hand and enquired in a tearful voice:

"But you do forgive me, brother, don't you, eh?"

"Angel!" answered Chelkash mockingly in the same tone of voice. Rising and swaying on his feet, he said: "Forgive? There's nothing to forgive! You tried to do me in today, and I might try to do you in tomorrow!"

"Ekh, brother, brother!" sighed Gavrila, mournfully shaking his head.

Chelkash stood in front of him with a queer smile on his face; and the rag on his head, gradually becoming red, began to look like a Turkish fez.

The rain was now pouring down in torrents. The sea

murmured with a hollow sound, and the waves beat furiously and angrily upon the shore.

The two men remained silent.

"Well, good-bye!" said Chelkash ironically, walking off. He staggered, his legs trembled, and he held his head in a queer way, as if afraid it would drop off.

"Forgive me, brother!" Gavril begged once again. "Never mind!" answered Chelkash coldly, continuing on his way.

He staggered on, holding his head with his left hand and slowly twirling his yellow moustache with the right. Gavril gazed after him until he vanished in the curtain of rain, which was now pouring from the clouds more densely than ever, in thin, endless streaks, and enveloping the steppe with impenetrable gloom, the colour of steel.

He then took off his soaking cap, crossed himself, looked at the money that he grasped tightly in his hand, heaved a deep sigh of relief put the money inside his blouse and strode firmly along the beach, in the direction opposite to that in which Chelkash had gone.

The sea howled and hurled large, ponderous waves upon the sandy shore, smashing them into spray and foam. The rain beat heavily upon the water and the land..... The wind shrieked ... The air all around was filled with whining, roaring, and rumbling... . The rain blotted out both sea and sky.

Soon the rain and the spray from the waves washed away the red stain on the spot where Chelkash had lain, and washed out the tracks that Chelkash and the young lad had made on the sandy beach..... And nothing was left on the deserted seashore to remind one of the little drama in which these two men had been the actors.



AFLOAT

An Easter Story

I

The leaden clouds crept slowly over the sleepy river, seeming to sink lower and lower; in the distance their grey tatters appeared to touch the surface of the swift, turbid springtide waves, and where they touched the water, rose towering to the skies in an impenetrable wall of cloud, blocking the current and barring the way of the rafts.

And the waves, ineffectually trying to lift this wall, beat vainly against it in a low, plaintive murmur, recoiling from each impact to roll back into the damp gloom of the fresh spring night.

But the rafts sailed on, and the distance receded before them in a wilderness of heavy tumbled cloud masses.

The shores were invisible, hidden by the night, pushed back by the sweeping surge of the tide.

The river resembled a sea. The sky above it was wrapped in clouds. Everything was damp, oppressive and dreary.

The rafts glided swiftly and noiselessly over the waters, and in front of them a steamboat loomed out of the darkness, its funnel shooting out a merry swarm of sparks and its wheel blades churning the water.

Two red lanterns on the shallows glimmered larger and brighter, and the lamp on the mast swayed gently from side to side and winked mysteriously at the darkness.

The air was filled with the splash of water and the heavy sighs of the engine.

"Look ou-oot!" came a deep-chested shout from the rafts.

At the tail-end of the raft two men stood at the helm

oars. One of them was Mitya, the son of the timber-floater, a fair, sickly-looking thoughtful youth of twenty. The other was Sergei, the hired workman, a morose-faced strapping fellow with a red beard framing a set of strong prominent teeth with a bared upperlip drawn up in a sarcastic expression.

"Put over to larboard!" a loud cry from the head of the rafts once more rent the darkness.

"We know what to do, what you hollering about?" muttered Sergei testily, and taking a deep breath, he bent his body to the oar.

"Oo-ooch! Get going, Mitya!"

Mitya, with his feet braced against the wet logs, lugged the heavy pole of the tiller over to him with his thin hands, breaking into a hoarse cough.

"Put her over more to port!.... Godammit!" cried an anxious infuriated voice in front

"All you know's to yell! Your weakly son couldn't break a straw across his knee, and you put him on the tiller and then holler all over the river. Too stingy to hire another man, damned skinflint—messing around with your daughter-in-law. Well, yell yourself blue now!....."

Sergei now grumbled aloud, apparently not afraid of being heard—in fact, as though wanting to be heard....

The steamboat raced past the rafts, churning the water under its blades into a hissing foam. The logs pitched and tossed from the surge, and the braces made from twisted branches creaked with a dreary wet sound.

The steamer's lighted windows gazed out upon the river and the rafts like a row of huge eyes, casting their reflections in shimmering bright patches on the turbulent water, then vanished from sight.

The heaving swell threw waves splashing over the rafts the logs tossed up and down, and Mitya, swaying on his feet, clung hard to the tiller for fear of losing his balance.

"Now, now!" Sergei muttered mockingly, "doing

Afloat

dance! Mind your father doesn't yell at you again . . . he'll give you a poke in the ribs that'll send you dancing properly! Put over to starboard! Heave-ho, now! Oo-ooch! . . ."

And Sergei, with brawny arms, powerfully plied his oar, cleaving deep into the waters . . .

Tall and energetic, a trifle morose and sarcastic, he stood as if rooted to the logs with his bare feet, tensely poised, peering into the distance, ready at any moment to veer the rafts round.

"Christ, look at the way your dad's cuddling Mashka! The devils! No shame or conscience—the man hasn't! Why don't you go somewhere, away from those foul devils? . . . eh? . . . D'you hear what I say?"

"I hear!" said Mitya in an undertone, keeping his eyes averted from where, through the misty gloom, Sergei could see his father sitting.

"I hear! Ugh, you sop!" mocked Sergei and burst into a laugh.

"Some goings-on, I tell you!" he went on, provoked by Mitya's apathy. "There's an old devil for you! Marries off his son, then takes his daughter-in-law for himself and doesn't give a rap! The old blighter!"

Mitya said nothing and gazed back at the river where the clouds have closed in another dense wall.

Now the clouds were everywhere, and it seemed that the rafts were not floating down the current but standing motionless in the thick black water, crushed beneath the weight of these dark-grey masses of cloud which had fallen upon it from the heavens and stemmed its progress.

The river looked like a fathomless pool hedged in by towering mountains and clothed in a dense cloak of mist.

An oppressive stillness reigned all around, and the water, gently lapping the sides of the raft, lay as if in a hushed expectancy. There was an infinite sadness, a timid question in that frail sound, the only one amid the night, that seemed only to deepen its stillness

"A bit of a breeze now wouldn't be bad..." said Sergei. "Though better not—a wind'll bring rain," he debated with himself as he filled his pipe.

There was the flash of a lighted match, the sizzling sound of a clogged pipe, and the broad face of Sergei swum out of the murk in the light of a flickering red flame.

"Mitya!" came his voice. He was less morose now, and the amused tone in his voice was more in evidence.

"What?" answered Mitya in an undertone, his eyes still peering into the distance, staring at something he saw there through his big melancholy eyes.

"How'd the thing happen, my lad, eh?"

"What thing?" retorted Mitya in a tone of annoyance.

"How d'you get married? What a scream! How'd it happen? Now, you went to bed with your wife—and what happened next, eh?!"

"Hey, you fellows there! Look ou-oot!" a warning shout echoed across the river.

"He can yell all right, that damned rip!" Sergei observed in a tone of admiration, and returned to his subject.

"Well, come on, tell us about it! Mitya! Tell us how it happened, eh?"

"Oh, leave me alone, Sergei! I told you already!" said Mitya in a pleading whisper, and, probably aware that he would not shake off the importunate Sergei, he hurriedly began:

"Well, we went to bed. And I says to her—'I can't be your husband, Maria. You're a strong healthy lass, and I'm a sick, weakly man. I didn't want to marry at all, but Dad made me—you've got to, he says, and that's that! I'm not fond of your sex, and still less of you,' I says. 'Too lively by half. . . . Yes And I can't do anything of that kind .. you know..... It's just filthy and wicked... . . Children too.... You've got to answer for them before God . . .'"

"Filthy!" screamed Sergei, rocking with laughter, "Well, and what about her, Masha—what did she have to say, eh?"

"She..... 'Well, what am I to do now,' she says. Sits

and cries. 'Why don't you like me?' she says. 'It isn't as if I was ugly,' she says. She's a shameless hussy, Sergei! . . 'What am I to do—go to my father-in-law with my fine health?' I told her—'do just as you please . . Go wherever you want I can't go against my soul. Grandpa Ivan used to say that thing's a mortal sin. We're not beasts, you and I, are we?' And all she does is cry. 'You've spoiled my life, youth, poor girl that I am.' I was awfully sorry for her. 'Never mind, things'll come round somehow. Or, maybe you'll go into a convent?' I says. She starts swearing at that—'you're a fool, Mitya, a scoundrel, that's what you are. ,'

"Well, I'm blowed!" stuttered Sergei in amazement "D'you actually mean to say you gave her that bit of advice —told her to go into a convent?"

"That's what I told her," answered Mitya simply

"And she called you a fool?" said Sergei in a rising voice

"Yes . . She swore at me "

"I should think so too! And quite right! I'd have boxed your ears in the bargain if I was her," he added in a sudden change of tone. He now spoke sternly and weightily

"D'you think a man can go against the law? That's what you've gone and done! It's the way of the world—and that's all there is to it! There's no arguing about it! And what do you do? Crikey, what a thing to say! Go into a convent! Silly ass! What d'you think the lass wants? And you talk about a convent! Good lor', some people make you sick! D'you realize what you've done, you muff? You're no damned good yourself and you've ruined that girl's life, made her that old gaffer's mistress—and led the old fellow into the sin of lechery. Look how much law you've broken! Silly ass!"

"The law's in a man's soul, Sergei. It's the same law for all—don't do anything that goes against the soul and you won't be doing any evil on earth," said Mitya gently and soothingly, with a toss of his head.

"But that's just what you have done!" Sergei counter-

ed energetically. "A man's soul! Bah! ... What's the soul got to do with it? You can't put a ban on everything—it isn't done. The soul ... You've got to understand it first, brother, and then talk....."

"No, Sergei, that's not so!" Mitya broke in warmly, seeming to have suddenly kindled. "The soul's always pure, brother, like a dewdrop. It's in a shell, that's where it is! It's deep. And if you hearken to it you won't go wrong. It'll always be God's way if it's done the soul's way. For isn't God in the soul?—and if so, the law's there too. It's God who created it, God who breathed it into man. Only you've got to be able to look into it. Only by forgetting self can a man"

"Hey, you! Sleepy devils! Look sharp!" a thundering voice echoed over the river.

Judging by its lustiness the voice clearly belonged to a healthy, vigorous man pleased with himself and the world, a man richly endowed with vitality and well aware of it. He shouted not because he was provoked to do so by the raftsmen, but because his heart swelled with a sense of elation and vigour, the sheer joy of living that sought an outlet and found it in that lusty boisterous sound.

"Hear him bark, the old devil!" Sergei noted with pleasure, keeping a vigilant lookout in front of him. "Sporning like a couple of doves! Ain't you envious, Mitya?"

Mitya turned his eyes indifferently to the fore oars where two figures could be seen running across the rafts from side to side, now stopping close to each other, now merging into a dark blur.

"Don't you envy 'em?" repeated Sergei.

"Why should I? It's their sin, and they'll answer for it" answered Mitya quietly.

"So!" drawled Sergei ironically, and refilled his pipe. The darkness was once more lit up by a red glow.

The night grew deeper, and the grey, black clouds descended still lower over the still broad river.

"Where'd you get all that wisdom from, Mitya, eh? Or were you born that way? You don't take after your

With Dad a bit He's full o' spunk, your Dad is. Just think—the old fellow's half a century, and look at the peach he's getting off with! She's a regular beauty! And hasn't she fallen for him—you can see that with half an eye Yes, she loves him, my dear fellow She's crazy about him Who wouldn't love a trump like that? The king of trumps, that's what your Dad is, a topnotcher. It does your heart good to see the way he handles his work; he's made a pretty penny too; looked up to plenty, and his head's screwed on right M'yes. You don't take after your Dad, or after your mother either, Mitya? I wonder what your father'd do if your mother, Anfisa, had been alive? Humph! I can just see it '.. She was pretty not sturr too, your Ma was A match for Silan"

Mitya was silent, leaning on his oar and gazing into the water

Sergei fell silent too From the front of the rafts came a woman's rippling laughter, answered by a man's deep laugh Their figures, woven into the darkness, were barely visible to Sergei, who peered at them with curiosity through the gloom One could distinguish that the man was tall and was standing by the oar with his legs wide apart half-facing a plump little woman who was leaning her bosom against another oar within ten feet of the first She wagged a premonitory finger at the man and went into gales of merry laughter. Sergei turned away with a sigh of regret, and after a profound silence, began again:

"Ah, well! They're having a sweet time Lovely! Nothing for a lonely vagabond like me! Gad, I'd never in my life leave a woman like that if I had her! Hang it, I'd squeeze the life out of her if I got her in my hands There! That's the way I love you—let her know it . Hell! I've got no luck with women . Looks like they don't take to ginger fellows M'yes She a capricious bit—that one is A proper minx! She's out for a good time, Mitya! Hi, are you asleep?"

"No," Mitya answered softly.

"Good for you! How d'you intend to go through life, brother? Come to think of it, you're all alone in the blessed world. That ain't very cheerful! What d'you intend to do with yourself? You won't be able to live among people. You're a poor fish of a man. What's the use of a man who can't stand up for himself! What you need in life, brother, are fangs and claws. Everyone'll try to worst you. Now, tell me, can you stick up for yourself? I'd like to see you doing it! Bah! You're a poor fish!"

"D'you mean me?" Mitya came out of his reveries with a start. "I'll go away. This very autumn—to the Caucasus—and that's all! God! Only to get away from you people! Soulless people! Godless men you are—only to get away from you is salvation! What are you living for! Where's your God? It's a mere word to you.... D'you live according to Jesus Christ? You—you're wolves! People over there are different, their souls live in that of Christ, and their hearts are filled with love and they yearn for the world's salvation. ... And you? Oh, you! Beasts, sinks of corruption! There are different people. I've seen them. They've called me. I'll go to them. They brought me the holy book of scriptures. Read it, man of God, they said, dear brother of ours, read the word of truth! ... And I read it, and my soul was reborn by this word of God. I'll go away. I'll run away from you mad wolves, who feed on each other's flesh. May you be damned!"

Mitya uttered all this in a passionate whisper, choking with wrath and withering scorn towards these mad wolves, overcome by a sudden hungering for the people whose souls yearned for the salvation of the world.

Sergei was astounded. He stood silent for a while with his mouth agape and his pipe in his hand. Then, after a moment's thought, he glanced round and said in a hollow, sullen voice:

"Fancy going off the deep end like that!..... You're pretty fierce too. You shouldn't ha' read that book. Who knows what kind o'book it is? Oh, well..... go ahead, clear

out, or you may get spoilt altogether. Go along with you, before you get real wild What kind of people are they down in the Caucasus? Monks? Or maybe the Old Believers? What are they—Molokans, perhaps? Eh?"

But Mitya had gone out as quickly as he had kindled He plied his oar, gasping with the effort, and muttered something rapidly and nervously under his breath

Sergei waited long and in vain for a response His robust simple nature was oppressed by the grim, deathly-still night He wanted to be reminded of life, to waken the hushed world with sound, to stir up and frighten the lurking rapt stillness of these ponderous masses of water slowly winding to the sea, and those inert mountains of cloud hanging drearily in the air. Life was being lived at the other end of the rafts, and that roused him to life

From there now and again came floating a soft thrilling laugh and snatches of exclamations, muffled by the silence and darkness of a night saturated with the fragrance of spring, a night that stirred a passionate longing to live.

"Stop it,—Mitya what you tacking for? The old man'll start swearing, you watch," he said, no longer able to endure the silence, and noticing that Mitya was stabbing the water with his oar in a desultory fashion Mitya stopped, wiped the perspiration from his brow, and froze motionless on his oar, breathing hard

"Very few steamboats about today somehow.... Been sailing so long and only came across one of 'em"

And seeing that Mitya evinced no intention of replying, he went on argumentatively:

"I suppose that's because navigation hasn't started yet. It's only just beginning. We'll make Kazan in fine time—the Volga's pulling grand. Got a giant's spine, she had—lift anything on earth. What's the matter with you? Got the wind up, Mitya, or what? Eh?"

"What do you want?" answered Mitya irritably.

"Nothing. Funny chap you are Why don't you say

something? Thinking all the time? Chuck it. It ain't good for a man. Oh, you wiseacre—you think you're wise, but that you haven't a ha'porth of wisdom—that you can't see! Ha-ha!"

Giving himself a laugh in the knowledge of his own superiority, Sergei followed it up with a deep grunt, then fell silent for a while, broke off a whistle he had started, and pursued his train of thought.

"Thinking! That ain't a pastime for a common man. Look at your father—he doesn't worry his head, yet he lives. Spooning with your wife and making fun o' you, the two of 'em, you wise chump. Yes! That's the stuff! I bet you Masha's pregnant already, what? Don't get scared, the kid won't take after you. He'll be a sturdy bounder like Silan Petrov—you can take that from me. He'll be registered as yours, you know. Some business, let me tell you! Ha! Call you 'daddy' And you won't be his daddy but his brother, by the looks o' it. His daddy'll be his grandpa. How do you like that! Gad, what a dirty bunch o'sinners! A dare-devil lot! Isn't that so, Mitya?"

"Sergei!" came a passionate, agitated, almost sobbing whisper. "For Christ's sake, don't tear my heart, don't torture me, leave me alone! Be quiet! In the name of God I beg you not to speak to me; stop tormenting me, stop sucking my blood I'll throw myself in the river, and a great sin will lie on you. I'll destroy my soul—leave me in peace I swear by God—please!....."

The silence of the night was rent by a painfully shrill cry, and Mitya dropped on the logs as though struck down by something heavy that had fallen out of the sullen clouds poised above the black river.

"There, there!" muttered a dismayed Sergei, watching the figure of his companion writhing on the logs, as though seared by a burning flame. "You're a funny chap! If you take it so bad why didn't you..... er. .. why didn't you say so, silly."

"You've been tormenting me all the way. Why? Wha

am I—your enemy? eh? your enemy?" Mitya whispered passionately ..

"Funny chap you are! Really, you are!" stammered Sergei in a flustered and injured tone. "How's I to know? I don't know. what's going on' in your soul!"

"I want to forget it all, don't you understand! Forget it for all time! My disgrace the terrible anguish ... You're savages! I'll go away! I'll go for ever .. I can't stand it any more!."

Yes, go away! ..." bellowed Sergei in a voice that reverberated over the river, and followed up the exclamation with a thunderous cynical invective But the words suddenly died on his lips and he seemed to shrink as he squatted down, apparently stunned at the human drama that had unfolded before him and to which he could no longer shut his eyes

"Hey, you!" the voice of Silan Petrov came floating over the river "What's up there? What's the barking about? Eh-ho-o?"

Silan Petrov seemed to like making a noise, wakening the heavy silence of the river with his deep, powerful lungs His shouts followed one another in quick succession, rending the warm damp air with a lusty vitality that seemed to crush the puny figure of Mitya who was again at his oar. Sergei answered his employer at the top of his voice, while in an undertone he cursed him in picturesque, spicy Russian terms Two voices split the silence of the night, tore it and shook it in a tumult of sound that now mingled in a deep rich note like the tone of a brass trumpet, now rose to a shrill falsetto, floated in the air, faded, and died Then silence reigned once more.

Yellow patches of moonlight fell upon the water from out the rifts in the clouds and vanished with a brief gleam into the smudgy greyness around

The rafts drifted on amid the darkness and silence

II

At one of the fore oars stood Silan Petrov in a red shirt open at the throat, revealing a powerful neck and a strong

hairy chest, as hard as an anvil. A mop of raven-black hair tumbled over his brows, and from under them gleamed a pair of smiling hazel eyes. His sleeves, rolled up to the elbows, bared his muscular hands that were gripping the oar. Leaning slightly forward, he peered intently into the murky distance.

Masha stood within three paces of him, sideways to the current, and regarded the broad-chested figure of her man with a smile. Both were silent, engrossed with their observations—he gazing into the distance, she studying the play of his vivacious bearded face.

"A fisherman's campfire, I suppose!" he said at length, facing her. "It's all right then. We're keeping straight! Oo-ooch!" he puffed, sending out a column of hot air, as he dipped his oar to larboard and gave a powerful tug.

"Don't overdo it, Masha dear!" he observed, seeing her make the same dexterous movement with her oar.

Plump and round, with black impudent eyes and rosy cheeks, barefooted, wearing only a wet sarafan that clung to her body, she turned her face to Silan and said with a tender smile:

"You take too much care of me. I'm pretty strong, thank God!"

"I don't when I kiss you," said Silan with a shrug,

"You shouldn't!" she whispered provokingly.

They said nothing for a while, devouring each other with hungry eyes.

The water rippled dreamily beneath the rafts. Somewhere far away on the lee the cocks began to crow.

The rafts sailed on with a faint rocking motion towards the thinning, melting darkness, where the clouds now stood out in sharper contours and lighter shades.

"Silan! D'you know what they were squealing about there? I know, honestly I do! Mitya must have been complaining about us to Sergei, and started whining for misery, and Sergei swore at us!"

Masha searched his face, which at her words had grown grim, cold and hard.

"Well, what of it?" he asked drily

"Oh, nothing."

"If it's nothing, there was nothing to talk about."

"Don't be angry!"

"What, at you? I'd like to at times, but I just couldn't"

"Do you love your Masha?" she whispered playfully, bending towards him.

"Oo-ooch! he ejaculated with an expressive grunt, and holding out his powerful arms to her, he said between clenched teeth:

"Come here . . . Don't tease . . ."

She curved her lithe body like a cat and slipped softly into his arms

"We'll throw the rafts off the course again!" he whispered, kissing her face that flamed under his lips

"Enough! It's getting light . . . They can see us from the other end!"

She tried to wriggle free, but his arm tightened about her.

"Can they? Let 'em see! Let everybody see! To hell with them all I'm committing a sin, that's a fact I know it! What of it? I'll answer for it before God. You haven't been his wife anyway. That means you're free to do anything you like with yourself. It's hard on him? I know it is. What about me? D'you think there's anything flattering in living with a son's wife? Though, it's true, you're not his wife . . . Still! Taking my social position, what do I look like now? And isn't it a sin before God? It is! I know it all! And I've gone against it all. And damme, it's worth it! We live once on this earth, and may die any day. Ah, Maria! If only I'd have waited another month before marrying off Mitya! Things would ha' been different. As soon as Anfisa died, I'd have sent a matchmaker down to you—and the thing's done! All lawful and proper! No sin and no shame! It was my mistake. It'll eat the heart out o' me for five or ten years, that mistake will kill you before you die . . ."

"Oh, come, drop it, don't worry about it. We've talked it over plenty and enough," whispered Masha, and gently twisting out of his arms, she went back to her oar. He began jerkily and violently plying his oar as if desirous of shaking off the weight that pressed on his chest and cast a sudden shadow across his handsome face.

Day was breaking.

The clouds, growing thinner, straggled across the sky as if reluctant to make way for the rising sun. The water assumed the cold tint of steel.

"He mentioned it again the other day. 'Dad,' he says, 'isn't it a shame and disgrace for both you and me? Give her up'—meaning you," said Silan Petrov with a wry smile. "Give her up and come to your senses.' 'My son,' I says, 'my dear son, get out o' the way if you wish to keep alive! I'll tear you to pieces like a rotten rag. There'll be nothing left of your virtue. Cursed be the day that I brought such a degenerate like you into the world.' He stood trembling. 'Dad, is it my fault?' he says. 'It is your fault, you whimpering mongrel, 'cause you're a stone in my path. It's your fault 'cause you can't stand up for yourself. You're just carrion, that's what you are—a stinking garbage. At least if you were strong one could kill you—but one can't even do that to you, you miserable scarecrow.' He started howling! Ah, Maria! Men haven't got any gumption nowadays! Another fellow in my place—ugh! We'd soon shake off the noose! And we're only putting our heads into it! Who knows but we'll draw it tight about each other."

"What do you mean?" Masha asked timidly, gazing fearfully at the grim face of the man, whose whole personality emanated a cold tremendous force.

"I mean if he died..... that's what I mean. If only he'd die wouldn't it be wonderful! Everything'd drop into its rut. I'd give your folks the land—that would keep their mouths shut—and you and I'd go to Siberia ... or to the Kuban! Who's she? She's my wife D'you get me? We'd obtain the necessary document I'd open a shop in

some village. And we'd live our lives together, and pray off our sin to God. We don't need much. We'd help people, and they'd help us to ease our conscience . . . How'd you like it? Eh? Masha?!"

"Y-yes," she sighed, and with eyes tightly screwed up, she became lost in thought.

They were silent for a while . . . There was no sound but the rippling of the water . . .

"He's a sickly fellow . . . Maybe he'll die soon . . ." said Silan Petrov in a muffled voice.

"I hope to God it happens soon!" murmured Masha in a fervid voice, and made a sign of the cross.

The beams of the spring sun streamed in a flood of sparkling gold and rainbow on the water. A wind rose, and everything quivered into life, stirred and smiled . . . The blue sky amid the clouds smiled too at the sun-kissed waters. The clouds were now left behind the rafts.

There, gathered in a dark heavy cluster, they hung irresolute and motionless over the broad river, as if contemplating a way of escape from the living spring sun, rich with joy and lustre, the inveterate enemy of these mothers of winter blizzards who had tarried before the onset of spring.

In front of the rafts the clear blue sky shone brightly, and the sun, still matutinally fresh but vernally brilliant, mounted majestically into the azure depths of the heavens out of the purple-gold waves of the river.

To the right loomed the tawny ridge of the hilly bank in a green girdle of forests, and to the left the pale emerald carpet of the meadows gleamed in a diamond spangle of dew.

The succulent smell of the earth, of new-born grass and the resinous odours of the pine were wafted on the air.

Silan Petrov threw a look at the oarsmen behind.

Sergei and Mitya stood motionless at their oars, but it was too far to discern the expression on their faces.

He shifted his glance to Masha.

She was chilled. Standing by her oar, she shrank into a small round ball. All bathed in sunlight, she gazed before her with wistful eyes, her lips parted in that elusive alluring smile that makes even an unattractive woman seem fascinating and adorable.

"Keep a lookout there, lads! Oho!" roared Silan Petrov with all the power of his lungs, feeling a mighty surge of elation rising in his broad chest

His shout seemed to send everything rocking, and long did the startled echoes resound over the hilly bank



THE BREAK-UP

On the river opposite the city, seven carpenters were hurriedly repairing an ice apron the townsfolk had taken apart for firewood during the winter.

The spring was late that year—the stripling March looked more like October; only around midday, and not every day at that, a pale, wintry sun would appear in a sky shot through with sunbeams, and diving through the blue rents in the clouds, squint down ill-naturedly at the earth.

It was already Friday of Passion Week and still at night the dripping eaves froze into blue icicles a good half-arshin long; the ice on the river, now bare of snow, had the same bluish tint as the wintry clouds.

While the carpenters worked, the church bells in the town rang out their mournful, metallic appeal. The workers raised their heads and gazed into the murky haze that enveloped the town, and often an axe poised for a blow would hang for a moment in mid air as though reluctant to cleave the gentle sound.

Here and there on the broad surface of the river fir branches, stuck into the ice to mark the paths, cracks and fissures, pointed skywards like the hands of a drowning man twisted with the ague.

The river presented a dreary spectacle; deserted and bare, its surface a scabrous mass, it spread desolately away into the gloomy space from which a dank, chill wind breathed lazily and dismally.

Foreman Osip, a neat well-built little chap with a tidy silver beard that clung in tiny curls to his pink cheeks and mobile neck, old Osip always in the fore, was shouting:

"Get a move on there, you hen's spawn!"

And turning to me, he said mockingly:

"Now then, overseer. What're you standing there mooning for? What do you think you're supposed to be doing? Didn't Vassil Sergeich, the contractor, put you here? Well, then it's your job to keep us at it, 'Get a move on you so-and-so!' You're supposed to yell at us. That's what you're here for, and you stand there blinking like a fish. You're not supposed to blink, you're supposed to keep your eyes open, and do some shouting too. You're a sort of boss around here. Well, then, go ahead and give orders, you cuckoo's egg!"

"Get moving there, you demons!" he yelled at the men. "We've got to finish the work today, don't we?"

He himself was the laziest of the lot. He knew his business quite well, and could work with dexterity and zeal when he had a mind to, but he didn't care to take the trouble and preferred to entertain the others with tall stories. And so when work would be forging ahead and the men would be at it in silent absorption, suddenly obsessed by the desire to do everything well and smoothly, Osip would begin in his purring voice:

"Did I ever tell you about the time . . .?"

For two or three minutes the men would appear to pay no heed to him, engrossed in their sawing and planing, and his soft tenor would flow dreamily on, meandering around them and claiming their attention. His light-blue eyes half-closed, Osip fingered his curly beard and, smacking his lips with pleasure, mulled happily over each word.

"So he catches this here carp, puts it away in his basket and goes off into the woods, thinking about the fine fish soup he's going to have . . . And all of a sudden he hears a woman's voice pipe up, he can't tell from where: 'Yelesy-a-a, Yelesy-a-a! . . .'"

Lyonka, the lanky, angular Mordvinian, nicknamed Narodets, a young man with small eyes of wonderment, lowered his axe and stood gaping.

"And from the basket a deep bass voice answers: 'Here I am!' And that very same minute the lid of the basket snaps back and out jumps the fish and darts straight back into the pool . . ."

Sanyavin, an old discharged soldier and a saturnine drunk who suffered from asthma and had a grudge of long-standing against life, croaked hoarsely:

"How could a carp move about on land?"

"Have you ever heard of a fish that could talk?" Osip retorted sweetly

Mokei Budyrin, a dull-witted muzhik whose prominent cheekbones, jutting chin and receding forehead lent his face a canine appearance, a silent unprepossessing fellow, gave vent to his three favourite words in his slow nasal drawl:

"That's true enough "

His unfailing response to any story—credible, horrible, filthy or malicious—would be those three words uttered in a low voice that rang with conviction

"That's true enough."

Each time I heard them it was as though some heavy fist struck me thrice on the chest

Work stopped because lame and stuttering Yakov Boyev also wanted to tell a fish story, in fact he had already begun his tale, but no one listened to him; instead everybody laughed at his painful efforts to speak. He cursed and swore, brandished his chisel and foaming at the mouth yelled to everyone's amusement:

"When one man lies like a trooper you take it for gospel, but I'm telling you a true story and all you can do is cackle like a lot of numbskulls, blast you . "

By now the men had dropped their tools and were shouting and gesticulating, whereupon Osip took off his cap, baring his venerable silver head with its bald pate, and sternly admonished.

"Hey that'll do now! You've had your breathing spell, now get back to work!"

"You started it," croaked the ex-soldier spitting disgustedly on his hands.

Osip began nagging at me:

"Now then, overseer .. "

I felt that he had some definite purpose in distracting the men from their work with his chatter, but what I did

not understand was whether he did it to conceal his own laziness or to give the workers a breather. When the contractor was around, Osip behaved with the utmost servility, acting the simpleton in front of the boss, contriving every Saturday to wheedle a little extra money out of him for the artel.

On the whole he was devoted to the men, but the old workers had no use for him—they considered him a clown and a good-for-nothing and had little respect for him; and even the young folk who enjoyed listening to his stories did not take him seriously, regarding him rather with ill-concealed mistrust and often with hostility.

I once asked the Mordvinian, an intelligent chap with whom I often had some heart-to-heart talks, what he thought of Osip.

"I dunno. . ." he replied with a grin. "Devil knows . . . he's all right, I suppose." Then after a pause he went on:

"Mikhailo, the chap who died a sharp-tongued fellow he was, and clever too, quarrelled with him once, with Osip that is, and lammed into Osip something fierce. 'What kind of a man are you?' says he. 'As a workingman you're finished and you haven't learned to be a boss, so you'll spend your days dangling like a forgotten plummet on a string. That's pretty near the truth, and no mistake . . .'"

Then after another pause he added uneasily:

"But he's all right, a good chap on the whole."

My own position among these men was an extremely embarrassing one. Here I was, a lad of fifteen, put there by the contractor to keep accounts, to see that the carpenters did not steal the nails or turn the boards in at the saloon. Of course, they filched nails right under my nose, going out of their way to show me that I was quite superfluous, a downright nuisance, in fact. And if any opportunity afforded itself to bump me with a board or to do me some other minor injury, as if by accident, they would not hesitate to make the most of it.

I felt awkward and ashamed in their midst; I would

have liked to say something to reconcile them to my presence, but I could not find the words and the oppressive sense of my own uselessness weighed heavily upon me

Whenever I entered in my book the materials taken, Osip would walk over to me in his deliberate way and say:

"Got it? Now then, let's have a look . . ."

And he would screw up his eyes and scrutinize the entry.

"You don't write clearly enough," he would comment somewhat vaguely

He could read only printed lettering and he wrote in church Slavonic letters, too Ordinary writing was unintelligible to him.

"What's that funny-looking curlicue there?"

"It's the letter 'D.'"

"Ah, D! What a fancy loop. And what've you written on that line?"

"Boards, nine arshin, five"

"Six, you mean"

"No, five."

"What do you mean, five? Look, Soldier cut up one .."

"He shouldn't have . . ."

"Who says he shouldn't? He took half to the pub . . ."

He looked straight at me with his eyes as blue as corn-flowers, twinkling merrily, and, fingering his beard, said with shameless imperturbability:

"Come on, now, put down six! Look here, you cuckoo's egg, it's wet and cold and the work's hard; a fellow's got to have a little drink now and again to warm his soul, don't he? Don't be so upright, you won't bribe God that way . . ."

He talked long and earnestly, his gentle, caressing words seemed to engulf me like a shower of sawdust until I felt dazed and blinded by them and found myself altering the figure without protest

"Now that's more like it! Why, the figure even looks nicer, sitting there on the line like a nice, fat kind-hearted wench . . ."

I saw him triumphantly reporting his victory to the carpenters and knew that they all despised me for my weakness, and my fifteen-year-old heart wept with humiliation and ugly, dreary thoughts whirled in my head.

"How strange and stupid all this is. Why is he so sure that I won't go and change the six back to a five, and that I won't tell the contractor they sold the board for drinks?"

Once they stole two pounds of eight-inch spikes and clamps.

"Listen here," I warned Osip, "I'm going to put that down!"

"Go ahead!" he replied lightly, his grey eyebrows twitching "It's time to put a stop to all this nonsense! Go ahead, write it down, that'll teach the sons of bitches .. "

And he shouted to the men:

"Hey you, loafers, you'll be paying a fine for those spikes and clamps!"

"What for?" the ex-soldier demanded grimly.

"You can't get away with that sort of thing all the time," Osip calmly explained

The carpenters grumbled and looked askance at me, and I was not at all sure that I would carry out my threat and whether, if I did, I would be doing right.

"I'm going to quit this job," I said to Osip. "You can all go to the devil! I'll be taking to thieving myself if I stay with you fellows much longer."

Osip pondered this for a while, stroking his beard thoughtfully. Then he squatted down beside me and said softly:

"You know, lad, you're quite right!"

"Eh?"

"You've got to clear out. What sort a foreman or overseer are you? In a job like this a man must have respect for property, he's got to have the soul of a watchdog to guard his master's belongings like his own hide .. . A pup like you's no good for a job like this, you haven't any feeling for property. If Vassil Sergeich knew how you let us carry on he would take you by the scruff of your neck and throw you right out, he would! Because you're not an asset to him, you're

a liability and a man has to be an asset to his master. See what I mean?"

He rolled a cigarette and handed it to me

Have a smoke, penpusher, it'll clear your head. If you weren't such a smart, handy lad, my advice to you would be: take the holy orders! But you haven't got the character for that; you're a stubborn, hard sort of chap, you wouldn't give in to the abbot himself. With a character like yours you'll never get on in the world. And a monk's like a jackdaw, he don't care what he pecks; so long as there are seeds he don't care where they come from. I'm telling you all this from the bottom of my heart because I can see that you're out of place here, a cuckoo's egg in a strange nest."

He took off his cap as he always did when he was about to say something particularly important—stared up at the bleak sky and observed piously:

"God knows we're a thieving lot and he won't forgive us for it."

"That's true enough," Mokei Budyrin trumpeted.

From that moment silver-haired Osip with his bright eyes and dusky soul had a pleasant fascination for me; a sort of friendship sprang up between us, although I noticed that his good relations with me embarrassed him somehow; in front of the others he looked at me vacantly, his corn-flower blue eyes darting this way and that, and his lips twisted in a false, unpleasant grimace as he addressed me:

"Now then, keep you eyes peeled, earn your living, can't you see Soldier over there chewing nails for all he's worth."

But when we were alone he spoke with a gentle wisdom and a clever little gleam played in his bright blue eyes as they looked straight into mine. I listened carefully to what this old man had to say, for his words were true and honestly weighed, although sometimes he spoke strangely.

"A man ought to be good," I remarked once

"Yes, indeed!" he agreed. Then he chuckled and with downcast eyes, he went on softly:

"But what exactly do you mean by 'good'? The way I see it, people don't care a hang about your goodness or honesty so long as it doesn't benefit them. No, it pays to be nice to them, amuse them, humour them.... and someday perhaps it will bring you good returns! Of course, I don't deny it must be a fine thing to look at yourself in the mirror and know you're a good man. But as far as I can see it's all the same to folks whether you're a ruffian or a saint so long as you're nice to them .. That's about the size of it, lad!"

I am in the habit of observing people carefully for I feel that each individual I come in contact with might help me fathom the secret of this mysterious, muddled, painful business called life; moreover, there is one question that has never ceased to torment me:

What is the human soul?

It seems to me that some souls must be like brass globes fixed rigidly to the breast so that the reflection they cast back is distorted, ugly and repulsive. And then there are souls that are as flat as mirrors. Such souls might just as well not be there at all.

But most human souls I imagine to be formless as clouds of an indeterminate opaqueness like the fickle opal always ready to change its hue to conform to whatever colour comes in contact with it.

I did not know, nor could I imagine what comely old Osip's soul was like; it was something my mind could not fathom.

I pondered these things as I gazed out over the river to where the town clung to the hillside, vibrating with the peal of bells from all of its belfries that soared skywards like the white pipes of my beloved organ in the Polish church. The crosses on the churches, like blurred stars captured by the dreary sky, winked and trembled and seemed to be reaching out toward the clear sky behind the grey blanket of wind-torn clouds: but the clouds scurried along, effacing with dark shadows the gay colours down below, and each time the sunbeams emerged from the bottomless abysses

between them to bathe the town in bright hues, they hastened to blot them out again, the dank shadows grew heavier, and after one instant of gladness all was gloomy and dreary again

The buildings of the town were like heaps of soiled snow, the ground beneath them was black and bare, and the trees in the gardens were like clods of earth; the dull gleam of the windowpanes in the grey house walls reminded one of winter, and the poignant sadness of the pale northern spring spreads softly over the whole scene

Mishuk Dyatlov, a tow-headed, broad-shouldered, gawky lad with a harelip, essayed a song:

*She came to him in the morning,
But he died the night before*

"Shut up, you bastard" the ex-soldier shouted at him, "have you forgotten what day it is?"

Boyev was also angry. He shook his fist at Dyatlov, hissing: "S-swine!"

"We're a hardy, tough lot," Osip said to Budyrin as he sat astride the top of the icebreak measuring its slant with narrowed eyes "Slip it out an inch to the left . . . that's it! A savage lot, that's what we are: Once I saw a bishop come along and the people crowded around him, fell on their knees and begged and implored him: 'Your Reverence,' they said, 'drive away the wolves, the wolves are ruining us!' And he towered over them and thundered: 'You're supposed to be Orthodox Christians? I'll have you all severely punished!' Very wrathful he was, why he even spat in their faces A little old chap he was, with a kindly face, bleary-eyed . . ."

About fifty yards down the river from the ice aprons some boatmen and tramps were chopping the ice around the barges; the crowbars cracked into the ice, crushing the brittle, greyish-blue crust of the river, the slender handles of the boat-hooks swayed back and forth pushing the broken pieces under the solid ice, the current gurgled and from the sandy beach came the murmur of streamlets On the ice apron planks cut into wood, saws screeched and hammers pounded,

driving clamps into the yellow, smoothly planed wood—and all these sounds mingled with the ringing of the bells which, softened by the distance, stirred the soul. It was as if all the labour of the bleak day had been a paean to spring, urging her to descend upon the thawing but still naked and wretched earth. . .

“Call the German!” someone yelled hoarsely, “we need more men . . .”

From shore came the response:

“Where is he?”

“Look in the pub.... .”

The voices floated heavily in the moisture-laden air and echoed drearily over the broad river.

The men worked feverishly but carelessly; everyone was anxious to get to town, to the bathhouse and then to church as quickly as possible. Sashok Dyatlov a well-built, agile lad with a shock of curly hair bleached white like his brother's was particularly worried. He kept glancing up-stream, saying softly to his brother:

“Don't you hear it crackling?”

The ice had stirred the night before and the river police had been keeping the horses off the river ever since the morning before; a few pedestrians were still slipping across over the foot-bridges, like beads sliding on strings, and you could hear the boards smacking against the water as they bent under the weight

“It's crackling up,” said Mishuk, blinking his white lashes

Osip, who had been scanning the river his eyes shaded with his hand, cut him short.

“It's the sawdust in your noodle crackling!” he said. “You get on with the job, son of a sorceress! Overseer, take your nose out of your book and keep them at it!”

There was about two hours' work left; the sides of the icebreak were already covered with gleaming planks as yellow as butter, and only the thick iron bands remained to be spiked on. Boyev and Sanyavin had cut out the grooves for

the strips of iron but it was now discovered that they had made them too narrow.

"You blind bat, you!" Osip scolded the Mordvinian, clasping his head in despair "Call that work?"

Suddenly a voice raised in a joyful shout was heard from the shore

"It's moving! Hooray!"

As if in accompaniment to the howl, a faint crunching rustling sound came down the river; the gnarled claws of the pine-bough markers trembled and seemed to clutch at the air for support, and, waving their boat-hooks, the boatmen and tramps noisily clambered up rope ladders to board their barges

It was strange to see the deserted river suddenly become crowded with people; they seemed to have popped up from under the ice and were now rushing back and forth like jackdaws scared by a gunshot, running hither and thither, hauling boards and poles, dropping them and picking them up again

"Get your tools together!" roared Osip. "Lively there, you . We're going ashore!"

"There goes Easter Sunday!" exclaimed Sashok bitterly.

To us it seemed as if the river stood still, while the sky shuddering and swaying, with the hill under it, began to sail slowly up the river. The grey sandy landship about twenty feet ahead of us also stirred and floated away

"Get moving!" Osip shouted, giving me a push "What're you gaping at?"

A dread sensation of danger gripped me, and my feet, feeling the ice shift underneath, mechanically propelled my body to the sand spit where the willow wands broken and bent by the winter winds jutted up naked and bare. Boyev, Soldier, Budyr, and the two Dyatlovs got there ahead of me. The Mordvinian ran beside me swearing angrily while Osip brought up the rear.

"Stop your howling, Narodets . . ." I heard Osip shout

"But what are we going to do, Uncle Osip . . ."

"Everything's all right, you'll see."

"We'll be stuck here for a couple of days."

"Then you'll sit it out."

"What about the holiday?"

"They'll manage this year without you."

"Bunch of cowards," sneered Soldier, sitting on the sand and smoking his pipe. "It's only a hop skip and a jump to the shore and you're ready to run like mad."

"You were the first to take to your heels," Mokei put in.

"What're you afraid of?" Soldier continued. "Christ was the Saviour and even he had to die"

"But he was resurrected, wasn't he?" the Mordvinian muttered, hurt by the other's remarks.

"Shut up, you pup!" Boyev shouted at him, "Sure he was resurrected Today's Friday, not Sunday!"

The March sun broke through a blue gulf between the clouds, and the ice glistened as if mocking at us. Osip scanned the deserted river, shading his eyes with his hand.

"She's stopped," he said. "But not for long . . ."

"No holiday for us," Sashok muttered sullenly.

Angry furrows cleft the Mordvinian's beardless, moustacheless face, as dark and rough-hewn as an unpared potato.

"So we can sit right here," he muttered, blinking, "with nothing to eat and no money. People are enjoying themselves, but we... . . . Victims of greed, that's what we are . . ."

"It's a matter of need, not greed!" Osip, his eyes glued to the river and his thoughts apparently far away, spoke as if talking in his sleep. "What are these ice breakers for? To protect the barges and everything else from the ice. The ice hasn't any sense, it'll just pile up on the string of boats—and good-bye property . . ."

"Spit on it. It isn't ours, is it?"

"No use reasoning with a fool"

"Ought to've fixed them earlier"

Soldier twisted his face in a frightful grimace.

"Shut up, Mordvinian!" he shouted.

"It's stopped," Osip repeated.

The boatmen were shouting on board their vessels. From

the river a chill breath and an evil, ominous silence were asted. The pattern of the markers scattered over the ice tered, and everything seemed altered, pregnant with tense pectation.

"Uncle Osip, what are we going to do?" one of the young lads asked timidly.

"Eh?" he responded absently.

"Are we going to stay here?"

"Maybe the Lord doesn't want you sinners celebrating s holiday, eh?" Boyev said, in a mocking nasal twang.

Soldier came to the assistance of his comrade and pointing to the river with his pipe muttered:

"Want to go to town, eh? Who's stopping you? The e'll go too. Maybe you'll get drowned—it'd save you from itting hauled to the clink anyway."

"That's true enough," said Mokei.

The sun slipped out of sight, the river grew dark, and the town was now more clearly visible. The young men gazed at it with impatient, longing eyes, silent and still.

I had that oppressive feeling which comes with the realization that everyone around you is concerned with his own thoughts and that there is no single purpose that might unite all into an integral, stubborn force. I wanted to get away from them and set off down the ice alone.

With a movement so sudden that he might have just wakened from a deep sleep, Osip got up, removed his cap and, making the sign of the cross in the direction of the town, said in a simple, calm tone of authority:

"Well, lads, let's go, and God be with us . . ."

"To town?" cried Sashok, jumping to his feet.

Soldier made no effort to move.

"We'll drown!" he declared.

"Stay here then!"

Casting his eye over the men around him, Osip cried:

"Come on, let's get going!"

Everybody was now on his feet and gathered in a huddle. Boyev, who was rearranging the tools in his basket, complained:

"Once you're told to go, you might as well go ... But the one who gives the orders will have to answer . . ."

Osip seemed to have grown younger and stronger. The crafty, good-natured expression had faded from his rosy face, his eyes grew darker, graver and more matter-of-fact. The indolent swagger too disappeared and he now walked with a firm, confident tread.

"Pick up a board, each of you, and hold it cross-wise in front. In case the ice cracks, which God forbid, the ends will hit the solid ice and stop you from going under. They'll help in crossing the cracks too. Anybody got a rope? Here, you, give me the level . . . Ready? I'll go ahead, and after me.... who's the heaviest? I suppose you, Soldier. Then Mokei, Mordvinian, Boyev, Mishuk, Sashok, Maximych, being the lightest, will bring up the rear. Off with your caps and let's pray to the Virgin. Here comes the sun to give us a send-off . . ."

With one accord the grey and brown heads of matted hair were bared, and the sun glanced down at them through a thin white cloud, only to hide again as if loth to raise unwarranted hopes.

"Let's go!" said Osip in a dry, strange voice. "God be with us! Keep your eyes on my feet. And no crowding. Keep at least a sagene apart and the more space the better. Come on, lads!"

Shoving his cap inside his coat and carrying the level, Osip stepped on the ice, cautiously sliding his feet along its surface. No sooner had he done so than a wild cry came from the river bank behind.

"Where're you going, you . . . sheep."

"Keep going, no looking behind!" the leader commanded crisply.

"Get back, you devils!"

"Come on, lads, and keep God in your mind! He's not going to invite us for the holidays....."

A policeman's whistle was heard.

"Now we're in for it!" Soldier grumbled aloud. "They'll let the police know over on the other side—and

through alive we'll be locked up for sure .. I'm not going to take any responsibility for this "

The string of men on the ice followed Osip's ringing voice as if it were something tangible to cling to

"Watch the ice in front of your feet!"

"We were crossing the river diagonally upstream, and being the last I had a good view of small, dapper Osip with his white, fluffy head as he skilfully slid along, barely lifting his feet from the ice. Behind him, as if threaded on an invisible string, filed six dark figures, doubled over and unsteady on their feet; now and then their shadows appeared next to them, then disappeared underfoot only to spread out on the ice once more. Their heads were bent low, as if they were coming down a mountainside and were afraid of stumbling

On the shore behind us a crowd evidently had gathered, for the outcry had risen to an unpleasant roar and you could no longer make out what they were shouting

The cautious procession resolved itself into mechanical, tiresome work. Accustomed to walking fast, I now found myself sinking into that somnolent, detached frame of mind when the soul seems to grow void and all thought of self is forgotten, while vision and hearing become inordinately sharp. Underfoot was the bluish-grey, leaden ice worn thin by the current, its diffused glitter was blinding. Here and there it had cracked and jammed into hummocks, ground by the movement of the river into fragments porous like pumice-stone and as jagged as broken glass. Blue fissures yawned coldly, ready to trap the unwary foot. The wide-soled boots shuffled along and the voices of Boyev and Soldier, continually harping on the same theme, tried my patience

"I'm not going to answer for this. . ."

"Neither will I "

"Just because a man has the right to order you about doesn't mean someone else mightn't be a thousand times smarter... ."

"You think being smart means anything—it's a glib tongue that counts around here.... ."

Osip had tucked the hem of his sheepskin jacket under his belt and his legs, encased in pants of grey army cloth, strode along with the ease and resilience of a spring. It was as if some creature visible to him alone were dancing in front of him, preventing him from walking straight ahead, and he was doing his best to circumvent it, slip away from it, darting to the left or the right, sometimes doubling sharply in his tracks, and doing it all at a dance-step describing loops and semicircles on the ice. His voice rang out clearly and resonantly, and it was pleasant to hear it merge with the ringing of the church bells

We were half-way across the four-hundred-sagene strip of ice when an ominous rumble came from upstream and at the same moment the ice shifted under my feet; taken by surprise I lost my balance and fell down on one knee I looked up the river and terror gripped me by the throat, throttled me and made the world turn black in my eyes: the grey crust of ice had sprung to life, it was buckling up, sharp angles appeared on the even surface, and a strange crunching like heavy boots walking over broken glass, filled the air.

With a quiet rush, clear water appeared next to me, somewhere splintering wood whined like a living thing, the men shouted huddling together, and through it all rang the voice of Osip:

"Scatter, there..... Get away from each other... ..What are you crowding together for! She's going good and proper now . . . Get a move on, lads!"

He leapt about as if attacked by wasps, jabbing the air around him with the level as though it were a gun and he were holding off some invisible assailant, while the town swam jerkily past him Under me the ice crunched into fine slivers, water washed against my feet and, springing up, I made a wild dash toward Osip.

"Where d'you think you're going!" he shouted, swinging the level. "Stop, you bloody fool!"

The man before us was not the old Osip; the face had grown strangely young, all the familiar features had gone, his blue eyes were now grey, and the man seemed to have grown a half-arshin taller. Straight as a brand-new nail, his feet firmly planted, he was shouting with his mouth wide open:

"If you don't stop running around and getting into a huddle I'll smash your skulls in!"

Again he swung at me with the level

"Where're you going?"

"We'll drown!" I said in a whisper.

'Hush!" Then, observing my sorry plight, he added softly:

"Any fool can drown, you make it your business to get out of here!"

Again he began shouting encouragements to the others, his chest thrust out and his head thrown back.

The ice crackled and crunched as it broke up lazily. In the meantime we were slowly being carried past the town. Ashore it seemed some fabulous titan had awakened and was rending the earth asunder; the shoreline below us was stationary while the bank opposite was slowly moving upstream—it could only be a matter of moments before it was ripped apart.

This ominous, creeping movement seemed to cut off our last link with land; the familiar world was receding into oblivion and my breast was laden with grief and my knees quaked. Red clouds slowly sailed across the sky and the jagged chunks of ice catching their reflection turned red too as if with the strain of reaching out for me. All the vast earth was in the throes of the birth pangs of spring, racked by convulsions, its shaggy, moist breast heaving and its joints cracking, and in the massive body of the earth the river was a vein pulsating with thick, warm blood.

It hurt to realize one's insignificance and helplessness in the midst of the calm, irresistible movement of the mass, and deep in the soul a bold dream took shape fed by this sensation of humiliation: if only I could reach out and lay

my hand on the hill on shore and say:

"Stop until I reach you!"

The resonant pealing of the bells was now waning to a melancholy sigh, but I remembered that the next night they would once more speak out gaily to proclaim the resurrection

If only I could live to hear them ringing!

.... Seven dark figures danced before my eyes as they leapt from one foothold to another and paddled in thin air with the boards they were carrying; and ahead of them the old man turned and twisted like a groundling reminiscent of Nicholas the Miracle-Maker, his imperative voice ringing out ceaselessly:

"Keep your eyes op-e-n!"

The ice buckled and the living back of the river shivered and heaved underfoot like the whale in the "Hunch-Backed Horse"; and with increasing frequency the fluid body of the stream gushed from under the armour of ice—the cold, murky water that greedily licked at the men's feet

We moved along a narrow perch overhanging a deep abyss. The quiet, luring splash of the water conjured up visions of bottomless depths, of my body settling slowly, slowly into the dense icy mass, saw my eyes grow blind, my heart ceasing to beat. I recalled the drowned bodies I had seen, with their slimy skulls, bloated faces and glassy, bulging eyes, the fingers jutting out from swollen hands and the sodden skin that hung on the palms like a rag

The first to get a ducking was Mokei Budyrin; he had been ahead of the Mordvinian, as silent and retiring as always; he had been calmer than the others and yet he disappeared as suddenly as if he had been pulled in by the legs, only his head and his hands gripping the plank remained above the ice.

"Lend a hand!" Osip cried "Not all of you, one or two'll be enough."

"Never mind, boys," said Mokei to the Mordvinian and me, as he blew the water out of his mouth "I'll manage .. myself."

He clambered onto the ice and shook himself.

"Damn it anyway, it looks as if you really might drown down here,"

His teeth chattering, he licked his wet moustache with his large tongue, his resemblance to a big, genial dog more marked than ever

A transient recollection flashed in my mind, I remembered how a month before he had chopped off the thumb of his left hand at the first joint and picking up the pallid, blue-nailed joint had looked at it darkly, with wondering yes, and addressed it in a low, apologetic tone:

"I've hacked at the poor thing so many times I've just lost count. It was out of joint anyway, didn't work properly. So now I suppose I've got to bury it," He carefully wrapped the amputated thumb into some shavings and put it in his pocket. Only then did he proceed to bandage the wound

The next to get a ducking was Boyev; it looked as if he had purposely dived under the ice. He let out a frenzied cry at once

"O-ow, help! I'm drowning! Save me, brothers, don't let me go down"

He thrashed about so hard out of sheer terror that we barely managed to haul him up, and in the fuss we almost lost the Mordvinian who went right under, head and all

"That was pretty nearly a trip straight to the devils," he said with an abashed smile as he clambered back on the ice, looking lankier and more angular than ever

A minute later Boyev went down again with a shriek

"Shut up, Yashka, you soul of a goat!" Osip shouted, threatening him with the level "Why must you scare everybody out of their wits? I'll teach you a lesson! Loosen your belts, boys, and turn your pockets inside out, it'll be easier that way"

Every dozen paces or so the ice, crunching and spuming, opened wide, sharp-fanged jaws dripping a murky froth and the jagged blue teeth reached out for our feet; the river seemed anxious to suck us down as a snake swallows a frog

The sodden boots and clothes hampered our movement and pulled us down; we were all clammy as if we had been licked down; clumsy and speechless, we plodded along slowly and submissively.

Osip, as wet as the rest of us, seemed to divine where the fissures were and leapt like a hare from floe to floe. After each leap we would pause for a moment, look around and give a resonant whoop:

"That's how it's done, see?"

He was playing with the river; the river stalked him, but so light and nimble on his feet was he that he easily dodged its passes and avoided the pitfalls. One might have thought he was steering the course of the ice and driving the large, solid floes for us to walk on.

"Keep your chin up, you children of God! Ho! ho!"

"Good for Uncle Osip!" the Mordvinian said in quiet admiration. "There's a man for you! The real sort."

The closer we got to the shore the finer the ice was chopped and men kept falling through it more and more frequently. The town had already practically floated by and the Voîga was not far ahead; there the ice had not moved yet and we were in danger of being sucked under.

"Looks like we'll drown," the Mordvinian said quietly, looking over his left shoulder at the blue haze of evening.

Suddenly, as if out of pity for us, a huge ice floe ran end on against the shore, climbed up it shivering and crunching, and then stopped.

"Run!" Osip shouted frenziedly. "Leg it for all you're worth!"

He jumped for the floe, slipped and fell down, and sitting on the edge of the ice where the water lapped up to him he let the rest of us pass. Five of us dashed for the shore jostling one another in an effort to get there first; the Mordvinian and I stopped to lend Osip a hand.

"Run, you pig's progeny, d'you hear me!"

His face was blue and trembling, his eyes had lost their lustre, and his jaw hung queerly.

"Come on, Uncle. . ."

His head dropped

"Must have broken my leg . . . Can't get up . . ."

We picked him up and carried him while he kept on
jumbling through chattering teeth, clinging to our necks

"You'll drown yourselves, you fools . . . We'd better
thank the Lord for pulling us through . . . Look out, it
won't carry three, step easy there! Follow the spots where
there's no snow . . . it's more solid there . . . Better drop
me, though . . ."

Osip screwed up an eye and looked me in the face

"That ledger of yours where our sins are recorded
just've gotten all soaked up, or maybe you've lost it, eh?"
he said

As we stepped off the end of the ice floe that had piled
up on the bank, smashing a boat into smithereens in the
process, the other end of the floe which was still afloat
crunched, broke off and sailed away, rocking in the current

"Well, well," the Mordvinian said approvingly "It knew
what it was about!"

Soaking wet and chilled to the marrow but in high spirits,
we were now ashore surrounded by a crowd of townsfolk
Boyev and the ex-soldier were already having an altercation
with them

"Well boys," Osip cried gaily as we lowered him onto
some timbers, "the book's all mucked up, soaked right
through

The book, tucked away inside my coat, weighed like
a brick; I pulled it out when no one was looking and threw it far
out into the stream where it plunked into the dark water
like a frog. The Dyatlovs were racing up the hillside to the
loft for some vodka, pounding each other with their
knives as they ran and shouting:

"R-r-rah!"

"Ekh, you!"

A tall old man with the beard of an apostle and the eyes
of a thief was speaking earnestly right into my ear

"You ought to have your mugs bashed in for scaring
peaceable folk, you anathemas, you . . ." he was saying

"What the hell did we do to you?" shouted Boyev, who was busy pulling on his boots.

"Christian folk were drowning and what did you do?" Soldier complained, his voice hoarser than ever.

"What could we have done?"

Osip was lying on the ground, his leg stretched out, going over his jacket with trembling hands.

"Soaked all the way through. Oh mother mine," he moaned "Done for, these clothes are, and I didn't wear them a year!"

He had shrunk and his face was wrinkled and he seemed to be growing smaller and smaller as he lay there on the ground.

Suddenly he raised himself, sat up, groaned and was off in an angry, high-pitched voice:

"So you had to get to the bathhouse and the church, you bloody fools Devil's spawn! You can go straight to hell! As if the Lord couldn't celebrate his day without you. Pretty nearly lost our lives . . . And clothes all mucked up. Hope you croak."

Everybody else was draining the water from shoes and wringing clothes, wheezing and groaning from exhaustion and arguing back and forth with the townsfolk, but Osip went on still more vehemently:

"Of all the things to do, damn their hides! Had to get to the bathhouse—the police station is where they belong, that's where you'd get your backwashing . . ."

"They've sent for the police," one of the townsmen said in a placating tone.

"What're you trying to do?" Boyev turned on Osip. "Why put on the act?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you!"

"Wait a minute! What do you mean?"

"Who started this business of coming across, eh?"

"Well, who?"

"You!"

"Me?"

Osip started as if a spasm had seized him.
 "Me-e?" he repeated, his voice breaking
 "That's true enough," Budyrin said in a level, distinct
 voice

"Honest, it was you, Uncle Osip," the Mordvinian bore
 out the others, but quietly, apologetically. "You must've
 forgotten . . ."

"Of course you started it," the ex-soldier ejaculated sullenly and emphatically

"Forgotten eh!" Boyev cried in fury "Tell me another one! I know him, he's trying to shove the blame onto somebody else!"

Osip fell silent and narrowing his eyes surveyed the tripping, half-naked men

Then emitting a strange whimper—I could not make out whether he was laughing or sobbing—twitching his shoulders and spreading out his arms, he muttered:

"That's right true enough, it was my idea now what do you make of that!"

"Aha that's better!" Soldier cried triumphantly

Gazing at the river, which was now seething like a millet gruel coming to a boil, Osip puckered up his face and guiltily looked away

"My mind must have gone blank like that, by God!" he continued "How we ever made it I don't understand Makes me sick to think of it Anyway, boys, I hope you won't hold it against me—after all, there was the holiday coming, wasn't there? You'll forgive me I must have sort of gone off a bit or something True enough, I started it old fool that I am . . ."

"You see?" said Boyev "And what'd you say if I got drowned?"

It seemed to me that Osip really was stricken by the uselessness and foolishness of what he had done as he sat there on the ground, looking as slippery as a new-born calf licked by its dam; he shook his head, passed his fingers through the sand around him and continued mumbling penitently in a strange voice, all the while avoiding everyone's eyes

I looked at him and wondered what had happened to the captain of men who had taken his place at the head of his fellows and led them so considerately, ably and imperiously.

An unpleasant emptiness welled up in my soul I dropped down beside Osip and, hoping to salvage something from the wreckage, spoke to him in a low voice.

"Don't, Uncle Osip. . . ."

"Ever see anything like it?" he responded in the same tone, giving me a sidelong glance while his fingers were busy untangling his matted beard. Then he went on as loudly as before for everybody's benefit: "What a to-do, eh?"

... The dark stubble of the tree-tops on the crest of the hill was silhouetted against the extinguished sky, and the hill itself pressed against the shore like some huge beast. The blue shadows of evening appeared from behind the roofs of the houses that clung scab-like to the dusky hide of the hillside, and looked out from the wide-open rusty-red, moist maw of a clayey gully creating the illusion that it was reaching out thirstily for the river

The river grew black and the rustle and crunching of the ice became duller and more regular; every now and then an ice floe dug end on into the shore as the hog roots the earth, remained motionless for a moment, then rocked, broke loose and sailed on farther while the next floe crept into its place.

The level of the water rose rapidly, sweeping against the bank and washing away the mud, and the silt spread a dark stain in the murky blue water. Strange noises filled the air—a scrunching and champing as if some tremendous beast were devouring its meal and licking its chops with a giant tongue

From the direction of the town the sweet and pensive melody of the pealing bells, now muted by distance, floated down.

Like two romping puppies the Dyatlovs dashed down the hillside carrying bottles in their hands while at right angles to us the, along the river front, came a grey-coated

police officer and two policemen in black.

"God Almighty!" Osip groaned, tenderly rubbing his knee

As the police approached, the townspeople cleared a passage for them and an expectant silence fell. The police officer, a lean little chap with a small face and a waxed reddish moustache, strode up to us

"So you were the devils . . ." he began sternly in a rather hoarse affected bass

Osip threw himself back on the ground and began hastily to explain:

"It was me, Your Honor, who started the business . . . Begging your pardon, Your Honor, it was because of the holidays . . ."

"You old devil," the police officer yelled, but his shouting was lost in the avalanche of humble entreaties

"We live here in town and on the other bank we've got nothing; didn't even have money to buy bread and, Your Honor, the day after tomorrow's Easter—got to take a bath and go to church like all good Christians, so I says, let's go, fellows, and take a chance; we weren't doing anything wrong I've been punished for my fool idea though—leg's broken, see

"That's all very well and good!" the police officer shouted sternly "But what if you had drowned?"

Osip heaved a deep, tired sigh

"What would have happened, Your Honor? Begging, your pardon, probably nothing . . ."

The policeman swore, and everybody listened to him in attentive silence as if the man was uttering words of ¹ to be heard and remembered instead of mouthing ² brazen insults

After taking down our names he left. We had drunk down the fiery vodka and feeling warmed up and in better spirits were getting ready to head for home when Osip, chuckling and throwing a look after the receding policeman, jumped lightly to his feet and fervently crossed himself.

"Thank God that's the end . . ."

"Why... . looks like your leg's all right!" Boyev said in his nasal twang, astonished and disappointed. "D'you mean you didn't break it?"

"You wish I had, eh?"

"Oh, you old comedian! You miserable clown....."

"Come on, boys!" Osip commanded, pulling his wet cap on his head

... I walked alongside him behind the others, and as we went, he spoke to me in a quiet, tender way as if sharing a secret known only to him

"No matter what you do and how you try, you just can't live unless you're crafty and cunning—that's life for you, damn it anyway. . . You would like to climb to the top of the hill but there's always some devil tripping you up. . . ."

It was dark, and in the gloom, red and yellow lights burst forth as if signalling the message:

"This way!"

We walked up the hill toward the ringing of bells. At our feet rivulets rippled, drowning Osip's caressing voice in their babble.

"Got around the police neatly, didn't I? That's how you've got to do it, so that nobody knows what it's all about and everybody thinks he's the main spring. Yes, it's best to let everyone think he's the one who did it. . . ."

I listened to him, but found it hard to understand what he was saying.

Nor did I want to understand him; as it is my heart was light and at ease. I did not know whether I liked Osip or not, but I was ready to follow him to the ends of the earth, even across the river once more, over ice that would be constantly slipping away from under my feet.

The bells pealed and sang, and the joyous thought came to my mind: How many more times shall I be able to welcome spring!

"The human soul's got wings," Osip sighed. "It soars in your dreams . . ." A winged soul? Wonderful!



THE PHILANDERER

At about 6 o'clock in the morning I felt a living weight thrust itself upon my bed, and somebody shook me and shouted right into my ear:

"Get up!"

This was Sashka the compositor, my chum. An amusing fellow, about nineteen years of age, with a mop of tousled red hair, greenish eyes like a lizard's, and a face smudged with lead dust.

"Come on, get up!" he shouted, pulling me out of bed. "Let's go on the spree today. I have some money, six rubles twenty kopecks, and it's Stepakha's birthday! Where do you keep your soap?"

He went to the wash basin in the corner and fiercely scrubbed his face. In the midst of his puffing and snorting he asked me:

"Tell me: 'star'—is that 'astra'—in German?"

"No, I think it's Greek."

"Greek? We have a new proof-reader at our place who writes poetry, and she signs herself 'Astra.' Her real name is Trushenikova, Avdotia Vassilievna. She's nice little lady—good-looking, only—rather stout. Where's your comb?"

As he forced the comb through his red mop of hair, he wrinkled his nose and swore. Suddenly he broke off in the middle of a word and closely examined the reflection of his face in the murky windowpane.

Outside the sun was playing on the brick wall opposite. The wall was wet from the previous night's rain and the sun tinted it red. A jackdaw was sitting on the funnel of the rain pipe, preening itself.

"What an awful mug I've got!" said Sashka, and then

he exclaimed: "Look at that jackdaw! How all dressed up she is! Give me a needle and cotton, will you; I'll sew a button on my coat."

He pirouetted round and round, as if he were dancing on hot bricks; so much so that the draught he caused blew some scraps of paper from my table.

Then, standing at the window and clumsily plying the needle, he asked:

"Was there ever a king named Lodir?"

"You mean Lothar. Why do you ask?"

"That's funny! I thought his name was Lodir, and that all lazy people descended from him! Let's go to a tavern first and have some tea. After that we'll go to the nunnery church for late matin and have a look at the nuns—I'm fond of nuns! . . . And what does 'prospectives' mean?"

He was as full of questions as a rattle with peas I began to tell him what "prospects" means, but he went on talking without waiting for me to finish.

"Last nigh that feuilleton writer, Red Domino, came to the printing office, drunk, of course, as usual, and kept pestering me with questions about my *prospectives*!"

After sewing on the button, higher than he should have done, he nipped the cotton with his white teeth, licked his red puffy lips and mumbled plaintively:

"Lizochka is- quite right I ought to read books, otherwise I shall die a boor and never know anything. But when can I read! I never have any time!"

"Don't waste so much time courting the girls "

"What am I—a corpse? I'm not an old man yet! Wait! When I get married, I'll give it up!"

Stretching himself, he mused:

"I'll marry Lizochka. That's a fashionable girl for you! She has a frock made of .. what do you call it? . . . barege, I think. Well! She looks so lovely in it that my legs tremble when I see her wearing it. I feel I could gobble her up!"

In the tone of a grave mentor I said:

"Take care you are not gobbled up yourself!"

"He smiled self-confidently and shook his head.

"The other day two students had an argument in our newspaper. One said that love was a dangerous business, but the other said no, it's quite safe! Aren't they clever? The girls like students They are as fond of them as they are of military men "

We left the house. The cobble-stones, washed by the rain, glistened like the bald pates of government officials The sky was almost shut out by banks of snow-white clouds, and every now and again the sun peeped through the spaces between these cloudy snow-drifts A strong autumn wind was blowing people down the street like withered leaves It buffeted us and rang in our ears. Sashka shrivelled up and thrust his hands deep down into the pockets of his greasy trousers He wore a light summer jacket, a blue blouse, and brown top boots, down at heel

At midnight an angel flew across the sky,
he declaimed in rhythm with our footsteps "I love that piece! Who wrote it?"

"Lermontov"

"I always mix him up with Nekrassov"

*And long she languished in the world,
Filled with strange desires*

And screwing up his greenish eyes he repeated in a low and pensive voice:

Filled with strange desires

"Good Lord! How well I understand that! I understand it so well that I would fly myself . Strange desires "

A girl walked out of the gate of a gloomy house in holiday attire—a "claret-colour" skirt, a black blouse with jet trimmings, and a golden-yellow silk shawl

Sashka pulled his crumpled cap from his head, and bowing respectfully, said to the girl:

"Many happy returns of the day, Miss!"

The girl's pretty round face first lit up with a tender smile, but she immediately drew her thin brows together in a stern frown and said in an angry, and half-frightened voice:

"But I don't know you!"

"Oh, that's nothing!" answered Sashka cheerfully. "It's always like that with me. They don't know me at first; but when they do they fall in love with me . . ."

"If you wish to be impudent. . . ." said the young lady, glancing round. The street was deserted, except for a cart laden with cabbages at the very far end.

"I'm as gentle as a lamb!" said Sashka, walking beside the girl and glancing at her face. "I can see it's your birthday"

"Please leave me alone."

The girl stepped out faster, clicking her heels determinedly on the brick sidewalk. Sashka halted and mumbled:

"By all means. There! I've dropped behind. Isn't she proud! What a pity I haven't a costume in which to play the part! If I had another suit on, she would have taken an interest in me, don't you worry."

"How do you know that it's her birthday?"

"How do I know? She comes out in her best clothes and is going to church. I'm too poor. That's what's the matter. Ekh! If only I had lots of money! I'd buy myself a little estate in the country and live like a gentleman . . . Look!"

Four rough-bearded men were carrying a plain deal coffin out of a side street. In front of them, carrying the coffin lid on his head, walked a boy, and behind them walked a tall beggar, carrying a shepherd's staff. His face was stern, and looked as if it were hewn out of stone; and as he walked he kept his red-rimmed eyes fixed on the greyish nose of the corpse that was visible above the edge of the open coffin.

"The carpenter must have died," surmised Sashka, removing his cap. "Lord rest his soul and keep him far away from his relations and friends!"

A broad smile lit up his face, and his bright eyes flashed merrily.

"It's lucky to meet a corpse," he explained. "Come on!"

We went to the 'Moskva' tavern, and entered a small room crowded with chairs and tables. The tables were cov-

ered with pink cloths. The windows were hung with faded-blue curtains. Flower pots were ranged on the window sills, and above the flower pots canaries in cages were suspended. The place was bright and warm and cosy.

We ordered some fried sausage, tea, half a bottle of vodka, and a dozen cigarettes of the "Persian" brand. Sashka sat down at a table near the window, spread himself out like a gentleman and launched into a discourse:

"I like this polite and genteel life," he said. "You are always complaining that this is bad and the other is bad, but why? Everything is as it should be. Your character is not human, it lacks harmony. You are like the letter 'yer'. The word can be understood without it, but they stick it on the end for form's sake, or perhaps because they think it looks better."

While he was criticizing me I looked at him and thought to myself:

"How much verve there is in that lad! A man who has so much in him cannot pass out of this life unobserved!"

But he had grown tired of sermonizing by this time. He took up his knife and scraped it on his plate to tease the birds. At once the room rang with the shrill trilling of the canaries.

"That set them going!" said Sashka, extremely pleased with himself. Then, putting down the knife, he ran his fingers through his red hair and thought aloud:

"No! Lizochka won't marry me. That's out of the question. But who knows? Perhaps she'll learn to love me. I'm madly in love with her!"

"But what about Zina?"

"Oh, Zinka is so plain. Lizochka—she's smart, she is," Sashka explained.

He was an orphan, a foundling. At the age of seven he was already working for a furrier. Then he worked for a plumber. For two years he worked as a labourer at a flour-mill that belonged to a monastery, and now, for over a year he had been working as a printer's compositor. He liked the work on the newspaper very much. He learned to read and

write in his spare time, hardly noticing it himself, and the mysteries of literature had a great fascination for him. He was particularly fond of reading poetry, and he even wrote verses himself. Sometimes he would bring me scraps of lead-smudged paper with formal lines scribbled on them in pencil. The subject of these verses was always the same, and they ran approximately as follows:

*I loved thee at first sight when
On Black Lake my eyes met thine,
And all my thoughts have been since then
Of thee and of thy face divine.*

When I told him that this was not poetry, he would ask in surprise: "Why not? Look! It ends with 'en' here and here, and with 'ine' here and here!"

"But then, remember how Lermontov's verses sound!"

"Oh, well! He had lots of practice, whereas I have only just begun! Wait until I get used to it!"

His self-confidence was amusing, but there was nothing repellent about it. He was simply convinced that life was in love with him, as the laundress Stepakha was; that he could do whatever he pleased, and that success awaited him everywhere.

The church bells were ringing, calling for late matin. The canaries, listening to the sound, which made the windowpanes rattle, stopped singing.

Sashka mumbled:

"Shall we go to matin or not?"

And then he decided.

"Let's go!"

"On the way he said in a tone of complaint blended with selfcondemnation:

"Tell me, how do you explain it? I always feel bored in church, but I love to go! The nuns there are so young. I'm sorry for them!"

In the church he stood at the gates where the beggars and other supplicants were gathered. His greenish eyes opened wide with wonder as he gazed at the choir where a crowd of choiristers were assembled, pale-faced and in pointed

hoods, all standing stiff and straight as if they were carved out of black stone. They were singing harmoniously, and their silvery voices sounded amazingly pure. The gold on the icons glittered and the glass cases reflected the lights of the candles, which looked like golden flies

The beggars sighed and muttered their humble prayers, raising their faded eyes to the dome. This was a week day, and there were few people in the church; only those had come who had nothing to do and did not know what to do with themselves.

In front of Sashka, telling her beads, stood a nun, rather a large woman, wearing a cowl. Sashka, who reached only up to her shoulder stood on tiptoe to peep into her round face and eyes, which were hidden by the cowl: and he stood like that, insolently staring at the nun with his lips pursed as if for a kiss.

The nun slightly bent her head and gave him a side-long glance, like a well-fed cat looking at a mouse. He collapsed at once, pulled me by the sleeve and hurried out of the church

"Did you see the look she gave me?" he said, closing his eyes with fright. Then he drew his cap out of his pocket, wiped his perspiring face with it and wrinkled up his nose

"Ge! The way she looked at me . . as if I were the Devil! It made my heart sink!"

Then he laughed and said:

"She must have had some bad experiences with us fellows!"

Sashka was kind-hearted, but he had no pity for people. Probably, he gave more money to beggars, and gave it more willingly, than many a rich man, but he gave it because he hated poverty. The little daily tragedies of life touched him not at all. He used to talk about them and laugh

"Have you heard? Mishka Sizov has been sent to prison!" he said to me one day with animation. "He walked and walked about, looking for work, and one day he stole an umbrella and was caught. He didn't know how to steal. They hauled him before the beak. I was walking along and

suddenly I saw him being led like a sheep by a policeman. His face was pale and his lips were parted. I shouted out to him: 'Mishka!' but he didn't answer, as if he didn't know me."

We went into a shop and Sashka bought a pound of marmalade sweets

"I ought to buy Stepakha some pastries," he explained, "but I don't like pastries... This marmalade is better!"

In addition to the sweets he bought some cakes and nuts, and then we went to a wine shop and he bought two bottles of liqueur, one the colour of red lead and the other the colour of vitriol. Walking down the street with the packages under his arm, he composed the following story about the nun:

"A buxom woman, isn't she! She must have been a shopkeeper's wife. Probably a grocer. I suppose she was unfaithful to her husband! He must have been a puny fellow..... Aren't those women cuaning! Take Stepakha, for example....."

By this time we had reached the gates of a house, painted brown, with green shutters. Sashka kicked the wicker gate open as if he were at home, set his cap jauntily on the side of his head and strode into the yard, which was strewn with yellow birch, poplar and elder leaves. At the other end of the yard, built against the garden wall, stood a wash-house, banked with turf right up to the window sills. Its roof was covered with yellowish-green moss, and the tree-tops swayed over the roof, reluctantly shedding their leaves. With its two windows the wash-house seemed to be gazing at us mournfully and suspiciously, like a toad.

The door was opened for us by a big woman, about forty years of age, with a large pock-marked face, merry eyes and thick red lips which were stretched in a pleasant smile.

"What welcome guests!" she cried in a singsong voice. And Sasha, placing his hands on her ample shoulders and bringing his face close to hers, said:

"Many happy returns of the day, Stepanida Yakimovna, and congratulations on receiving the holy mysteries!"

"But I didn't go to communion!" protested Stepakha.
 "It's all the same!" answered Sashka, kissing her three times on the lips, after which both wiped away the traces of the kisses, Stepakha with the palm of her hand and Sashka with his cap.

In the dark anteroom, encumbered with pokers, baskets and wash tubs, they found Stepakha's daughter, Pasha, busy with the samovar. Pasha was a young girl with large, bulging eyes that stared with stupid astonishment, typical of children who suffered from rickets. She had a wonderfully thick plait of hair of a soft golden colour.

"Many happy returns, Panya!"

"All right," answered the girl.

"You dummy!" exclaimed Stepakha. "You should say 'Thank you.'"

"Oh, all right!" retorted the girl angrily.

A third of the laundress' habitation was taken up by a large oven, and where the shelves for the bathers used to be there was now a wide bed. In the corner, under the icons, stood a table, laid out for tea, and at the wall stood a wide bench, on which it was convenient to place the wash tub. A shaggy dog looked through the open window like a beggar, resting his heavy paws with their broken claws upon the window sill. On the window sills there were flower pots with geraniums and fuchsias.

"She knows how to live," said Sashka, looking round the squalid room and winking to me, as much as to say: "I'm joking!"

The hostess carefully drew a pie from the oven and flipped its rosy crust with her fingernail. Pasha brought in the samovar, glistening like the sun, and cast an angry glance at Sashka. But he said, licking his lips:

"Hell! I must get married! I do love pie!"

"One doesn't marry for the sake of pie," observed Stepakha, gravely

"Oh, I understand that!"

The buxom laundress laughed merrily at this, but her eyes were grave when she said:

"You'll marry one day and forget me."

"But how many have you forgotten?" retorted Sashka with a grin.

Stepakha also smiled. Dressed as she was, too gaudily for her age, she resembled not a laundress, but a matchmiak-er, or a fortune teller.

Her daughter, looking like a silent gnome out of a sad fairy tale, was unwanted here, and indeed seemed to be totally unwanted on earth. She ate very carefully, as if she were eating not pie, but fish that was full of bones. And every now and again she slowly turned her large eyes towards Sashka and gazed into his thin mobile face in a queer way, as if she were blind.

The dog whined pitifully at the window. The brassy strains of martial music, the steady tramp of hundreds of heavy marching feet, and the beat of a base drum keeping them in step, came floating in from the street.

Stepakha said to her daughter:

"Why don't you run out and look at the soldiers?"

"I don't want to."

"This is fine!" exclaimed Sashka, throwing the dog a piece of pie crust "I don't think I need anything more!"

Stepakha looked at him with motherly eyes, and straightening her blouse over her high breast she said with a sigh:

"No, that's not true. There's a lot more things you need."

"What I just said was quite true," answered Sashka. "I don't need anything more now, if only Pashka would stop boring through me with her eyes"

"A fat lot I care about you," the girl retorted softly and contemptuously. Her mother angrily raised her eyebrows, but pursed her lips and said nothing.

Sashka moved in his seat uneasily and looking sideways at the girl said ardently:

"I feel as though I have a hole in my soul. So help me God! I would like my soul to be full, and calm, but I cannot fill it! Do you understand me, Maximich? When I feel bad I want to feel good. And when I get a happy hour I begin to feel bored! Why is that?"

He was already "feeling bored" I could see that. His eyes were roaming restlessly round the room as if taking in its squalor; a critical and ironical spark flashed in them. Obviously, he felt out of place here, and had only just realized it

He talked warmly about the wrongs that were done in the world, and about the blindness of men who had grown accustomed to these wrongs, and failed to see them. His thoughts flitted about like frightened mice, and it was difficult to keep pace with their rapid changes

"Everything is all wrong—that's what I see! You have a church in one place and next to it you have the devil knows what! Innokentii Vassilievich Zemskov writes poetry like this:

*Thanks for those few flashes
Which lit up the gloom of my heart,
For those sweet moments of contact
With your body divine.*

But it did not prevent him from cheating his sister out of her house by a lawsuit; and the other day he pulled his parlour maid Nastya by the hair."

"What did he do that for?" asked Stepakha, glancing at her rough hands, which were as red as the feet of a goose. Her face had suddenly become hard and she lowered her eyes

"I don't know . . . Nastya wanted to take him to court for it, but he gave her three rubles and she let it drop, the fool!"

Suddenly Sashka jumped up and said :

"It's time for us to go!"

"Where to?" the hostess asked.

"We have some business to do," said Sashka untruthfully, "I'll look in in the evening"

He offered Pasha his hand, but the girl looked at his fingers for a moment or so, not daring to touch them, and then she took Sashka's hand and shook it in a way that seemed as if she were pushing it away.

We went out. In the yard Sashka mumbled as he pulled his cap tightly over his head:

"The devil! That girl doesn't like me..... and I feel ashamed in her presence. I won't go there tonight."

Unpleasant thoughts appeared on his face, like a rash. He blushed.

"I must give Stepakha up," he said. "It's not a nice business! She's twice my age, and....."

But by the time we turned the corner he was already laughing and saying to himself cheerfully, without a trace of boastfulness:

"She loves me. She tends me like a flower. So help me God! It makes me feel ashamed. Sometimes I feel so good being with her..... better than with my own mother! It's simply wonderful. I tell you, brother, they are troublesome things, are women. But they're a good lot for all that. They deserve all our love..... But is it possible to love them all?"

"It would be good if you loved at least one well," I suggested.

"One, one," he mumbled pensively. "But try loving only one!....."

He gazed into the distance, beyond the blue strip of the river, at the yellowing meadows, at the black bushes stripped by the autumn wind and sparsely clothed with golden leaves. Sashka's face looked kind and thoughtful. It was evident that he was full of pleasant, recollections, which played upon his soul as sunbeams played upon a river.

"Let's sit down," he suggested, halting at the edge of a gully near the nunnery wall.

The wind was driving the clouds across the sky. Shadows were flitting across the meadow. On the river a fisherman was tapping away, caulking his boat.

"Listen," said Sashka. "Let's go to Astrakhan."

"What for?"

"Oh, just like that. Or else, let's go to Moscow."

"But what about Liza?"

"Liza..... Y-e-ss....."

He looked straight into my eyes and asked me:

"Have I fallen in love with her yet, or not?"

"Ask a policeman," I answered.

He laughed freely and heartily, like a child. He glanced up at the sun and then at the shadows flitting across meadow, and jumping to his feet he said:

"Those confectionary girls will be coming out soon, come along!"

He strode rapidly down the street. There was a look of concern on his face, he had his hands in his pockets, and his cap was drawn low over his forehead. From the gates of a one-story, barrack-like building, girls came running, one after another, in kerchiefs and grey aprons. One of them was Zina, a dark, graceful girl with Mongolian features and almond eyes, wearing a red blouse fitting tightly round her bust.

"Come and have some coffee," said Sashka to her, clutching her by the arm. Then he went on to say hurriedly:

"Do you mean to tell me you intend to marry that mangy cur? Why, he'll jealous of you . . ."

"Every husband ought to be jealous," answered Zina gravely. "Do you want me to marry you?"

"No, don't marry me either!"

"Drop that," the girl said, frowning. "Why aren't you at work?"

"I've taken a holiday."

"Ekh, you! . . I don't want any coffee."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Sasha, pulling her into a pastry shop.

When they sat down at a small table by the window, he asked her:

"Do you believe me?"

"I believe every animal, the fox and the hedgehog. As for you—I'll wait a bit," the girl answered slowly.

"Well, without you I shall go to the dogs!"

At that moment Sashka really believed that he was passing through a tragedy—his lips trembled, his eyes were moist. He was sincerely moved.

"Well, I'm a lost man, drowned in my own tears. But it

serves me right, since I can't catch fortune by the hem of her cloak. But it won't be easy for you either! I shall give you no rest. Let him have a business and own horses, but you'll not be able to eat a thing, thinking of me. Mark my words.”

“It's time I stopped playing with dolls,” the girl said softly but angrily.

“Oh, so I am a doll to you, eh?”

“I wasn't speaking of you.”

“There, look at them, Maximich! They are a race of snakes. They have no feeling. She stings me in the heart, and I suffer. But she says: Oh, you are a doll!”

Sashka was indignant. His hands trembled, and his eyes grew dark with anger.

“How can one live with creatures like that?” he demanded.

“A fine actor,” I thought to myself, watching him almost with admiration.

His acting obviously captivated the girl, touched her. Wiping her lips with a corner of her kerchief, she asked in a kindly voice:

“Will you be free on Sunday?”

“Free from what? From you?”

“Don't play the fool..... Come over here

They went over to a corner, and Sashka, with flashing eyes, talked long and ardently to the girl in an undertone. Finally, she exclaimed with sad vexation:

“Good Lord! What kind of husband will you make?”

“I?” shouted Sashka. “This kind!”

And without being in the least embarrassed by the presence of the fat pastry cook, he tightly hugged the girl and kissed her on the lips.

“What are you doing, are you mad?” the girl exclaimed in confusion, tearing herself out of his arms.

She fled out of the door like a bird, and Sashka, wearily sitting down at the table shook his head and said disapprovingly:

“What a temper! She's wild animal, not a girl!”

"What do you want of her?"

"I don't want her to marry that bald droshky driver. It's a scandal. I won't allow it. I can't bear it!"

Finishing his coffee, now quite cold, he seemed to have forgotten the tragedy he had just passed through and began to reflect lyrically:

"Do you know? On holidays, or even on week days, when a lot of girls are out together strolling, or going home from work, or from highschool, my very heart trembles Good Lord! I think to myself What a lot of 'em there are! Each one must love somebody; and if they don't they certainly will love someone tomorrow, or within a month, it makes no difference Now this is what I understand. This is life! Is there anything better in life than love? Just think —what is night? Everybody is embracing and kissing—oh, brother! that's something, d'you know.. . It's something you can't even find a name for! It is really a heaven-sent joy."

Jumping up he said:

"Come along, let's go for a walk!"

The sky was overcast with grey clouds, the rain was coming down in a fine drizzle, like dust It was cold, raw and miserable. But Sashka, oblivious to everything, strolled along in his light summer jacket and chattered without ceasing about everything in the shop windows that caught his greedy eye—about neckties, revolvers, toys, and ladies' frocks, about machines, confectionary and church vestments. He caught sight of the bold type of a theatrical poster.

"Uriel Acosta! I have seen that! Have you? Those Jews talk well don't they? Do you remember? Only it's all lies There's one kind of people on the stage and another kind in the street, or in the market place I love jolly people--Jews and Tatars. Look how heartily the Tatars laugh... It's a good thing they don't show you real life on the stage, but something remote—boyars and foreigners As for real life --thank you very much. We have quite enough of our own! But if they do show you real life, let it be all true, and

without pity! Children ought to play on the stage, because when they play, it's real!"

"But you don't like what is real?"

"Why not? I do if it's interesting."

The sun peeped out again, reluctantly lighting up the rain-drenched town. We roamed through the streets until vespers, when the church bells called for prayers. Sashka pulled me to a waste lot, to the fence of an orchard that belonged to a stern government official named Renkin, the father of beautiful Liza.

"Wait for me here, will you?" he begged of me, leaping onto the fence like a cat. He sat down on a post and whistled softly. Then raising his cap with a pleased and polite gesture, he began to talk to a girl, who was invisible to me, wriggling so restlessly that he was in danger of falling off the fence.

"Good evening, Elizaveta Yakovlevna!"

I did not hear what the answer was on the other side of the fence, but through a chink between two boards I saw a lilac skirt, and thin wrist of a white hand holding a large pair of gardener's clippers.

"No," Sashka went on to say sadly, but untruthfully. "I haven't managed to read it yet. You know how hard I work. And I work at night. In the daytime I have to sleep—and my chums give me no rest. As I set type, letter by letter, I think only of you. . . . Yes, of course! Only I don't like full lines of type; verse is much easier to read. . . . May I come down? Why not? Nekrassov? Yes. . . . very, only he doesn't write much about love. . . . Why are you angry? Wait a minute—is there anything offensive about that? You asked me what I liked, and I said that most of all I liked love—everybody likes it. . . . Elizaveta Yakovlevna. . . . wait. . . ."

He stopped talking, hung over the fence like an empty sack, and then, sitting up straight, he sat there for several seconds like a mournful raven, tapping his knee with the peak of his cap. His red hair was beautifully lit up by the setting sun and tenderly ruffled by the wind.

"She's gone!" he said angrily, jumping to the ground. "She's offended because I didn't read some book—a book, the devil take it! She gave me something that was more like a flat iron than a book! It was about an inch and a half thick . . . Let's go!"

"Where to?"

"What does it matter?"

He walked on slowly, barely dragging his feet along. His face looked tired, and he glanced with vexation at the windows that were lit up by the slanting rays of the sun.

"After all, she must love somebody," he said plaintively. "Why doesn't she love me? But no! She wants me to read books! Thinks I'm a fool! Her eyes are brighter than the light of day—and she wants me to read books! It's ridiculous! Of course, I'm no match for her . . . but good Lord, you don't always fall in love with your equal!"

After remaining silent for a moment, he softly muttered

And long she languished in the world,

Filled with strange desires,

and remained an old maid, the fool!"

I laughed. He looked at me in surprise and asked:

"What, am I talking nonsense? Ekh, brother Maximich! My heart is swelling and swelling without end, I feel as if I am all heart!"

We reached the edge of the town, but the other side this time. Before us spread a field, and in the distance loomed the Young Ladies Institute, a tall white building surrounded by trees, standing behind a brick wall, and with brick columns running along the porch.

"I'll read books for her, it won't kill me," mused Sashka. Prospectives . . . like hell! I'll tell you what, brother. I'll go and see Stepakha . . . I'll put my head in her lap and go to sleep. Then I'll wake up, we'll have a drink, and then go to sleep again. I'll stay the night with her. We haven't spent a bad day, the two of us, have we?"

He squeezed my hand tightly and looked tenderly into my eyes.

"I like to walk with you," he said. "You are by my side, and yet you seem not to be there. You don't hinder me in the least. Now that's what I call being a real chum!"

Having paid me this doubtful compliment, Sashka turned on his heel and rapidly walked back to town. His hands were thrust into his pockets, his cap was balanced precariously on the back of his head, and he went along whistling. He looked so thin and sharp, like a nail with a golden head. I was sorry he was going back to Stepakha, but I understood that he had to give himself to somebody, he had to spend the richness of his soul on someone!

The red rays of the sun struck his back and seemed to be pushing him along.

The ground was coldish, the field deserted, the town seemed to murmur softly. Sashka stooped down, picked up a storie, and swinging his arm threw it far away.

Then he shouted to me: "So long!"



A DROLL STORY

When the red-haired doctor with the large nose, after tapping Yegor Bykov's body with his cold fingers, said emphatically, in his deep bass voice that the disease had been neglected and was now dangerous, Bykov felt as if someone had wronged him, just as he had felt on that pitch-dark night, in his young days, when he was a raw recruit, during the Turkish war, lying among the prickly bushes at Yeni-Zagra with a broken leg, the rain drenching him to the skin and the pain unhurriedly ripping his flesh from his bones

"Does that mean I'm going to die?" he asked

The doctor sat down at the table to write out a prescription, tried the rusty pen and mumbled something, but Bykov, staring resentfully at the window did not hear him. In the street feathers, shavings and dust were being driven helter-skelter before the wind

"You have been drinking too much," the doctor said

The sick man mentally swore at the doctor and answered angrily:

"That's not the cause. Lots of people drink, don't they? But they don't all die before their time!"

He heard a still small voice within him say tantalizingly:

"Take a hen. She will go on living, lay eggs and hatch chickens. But you—you will die, and all the labour of your hard life will have been in vain"

Silently seeing the doctor to the door, Bykov, wearing slippers on his bare feet and a grey dressing gown over his underclothing, glanced at the mirror. It reflected with unusual distinctness a narrow, gaunt face, mournfully lit up by greenish eyes, and a long straight beard that fell from his cheeks and chin to his breast. The face did not look good.

Bykov sighed, moaned softly, sat down in a leather armchair by the window and, breathing hard through his nose, felt a gnawing pain in his right side, tirelessly boring through his liver and causing the drunken feeling of weakness and resentment at having been wronged to spread all over his body.

"I've been drinking too much! But what do you solace yourself with, fool?" he snarled at the doctor, whom he saw getting into his droshky.

"Shall I put the samovar on?"

The fat, stupid cook, Agaphia, stood at the door.

"How many times have I told you, red mug, not to put the armchair in the sun, near the window! Look how it's faded. Do you think the sun shines to spoil furniture?"

"You shifted it there yourself," answered Agaphia, quite unruffled.

Bykov remembered how painful it had been for him to shift the heavy armchair, and this, together with the woman's unruffled demeanour, irritated him still more.

"Go to the devil!" he said.

Agaphia vanished. Bykov, watching her go, thought to himself bitterly:

"She will live another forty years, but I must die! What's going to happen to the property? I didn't even have time to get married, I was always so busy. I should have married immediately after the war; I would have had children now. Prudence prevented me. And I began taking the cure too late. Who was to know that my life was fated to be a short one?"

His head sank to his breast and he complained aloud:

"Oh, Lord, Lord . . ."

What vexed him, and seemed sillier than all, was that he had no one to whom to leave the property he had accumulated after twenty years of effort and cunning. Leave it to a monastery, or to some other holy cause?—His reason could not consent to this. He knew perfectly well that priests and monks, and other people who had charge of God's property

A Droll Story

on earth, were unreliable, that they were ignorant sinners no less than he was. And he was not quite certain about God either. His attitude towards God was one of wariness and distrust. He always felt that God knew all his deeds and thoughts, that He was closely watching him, and that it was no other than God who had repeatedly put a spoke in his wheel, had rebuked him for his avarice, which was only human, and the driving force of life. There were times when he, Bykov, had had certain matters all nicely arranged, but suddenly a small flame flared up in his soul, like a match, and awakened grey, nebulous thoughts, awakened the fear of sin and of punishment, and sometimes even roused something resembling a feeling of pity towards men, which, however, he succeeded in suppressing.

He realized perfectly well that it was not the Devil who was playing with him, but God, compelling him, against his own reason, to yield to people; and he used to say, half in jest and half in resentment, to his hanger-on and confidant, Kickin, a timid hunchback, with eyes like a bird's:

"Why should I have pity for people? Nobody had pity for me. Nobody treated me with kindness."

"Absurd, of course," agreed Kickin.

Suddenly remembering Kickin, he took up a broomstick and tapped at the ceiling with it. Two or three moments later a little hunchback came noiselessly through the door. He had bandylegs and as he walked one foot stepped over the other and he waddled like a duck.

"Well?" he asked, timidly blinking his eyes like a sick hen.

"I'm going to die! Do you hear?"

Kickin passed the palm of his hand down his beardless face.

"Perhaps he's lying," he said, meaning the doctor.

"No. I know it myself."

"Humph! It's too early!"

"That's the whole point! Bah! What does it matter. If I must die, I must. You can't escape death. I am a soldier. But what am I going to do with my property?"

The hunchback poured out the tea, scraping his feet on the floor as he did so, and said with a sigh:

"According to the law, your property should pass to your nephew, Yakov Somov."

"Yes, he's my nephew, once removed!" growled Bykov angrily, and the anger intensified the pain in his side "I don't even know what he's like. I haven't seen him more than about five times."

"Still, according to the law....."

"The law!....." snapped Bykov with an oath.

"In that case, leave it to charity," advised Kickin hesitantly.

"Oh, no! I won't sow my seeds on stony places

"That's not amusing, of course."

Bykov thought for a while, and after giving vent to his wrath a little longer he told the hunchback to invite the nephew to come and see him the next day.

"I'll see what kind of an animal he is," he said.

Yakov Somov came in the evening, bowed respectfully, and without offering to shake hands, said:

"How do you do?"

His voice was not loud, but clear and high-pitched, and the words he uttered sounded significant; they were obviously not empty words, but filled with goodwill. He was not tall, but well-built, mild, bluish eyes shone serenely in his rugged face, a tuft of fair hair stuck out obstinately over his left ear like a Cossack's forelock and a small, fair, curly moustache glistened beneath his large nose. There was something strong, clean and attractive about him. Bykov noticed this at once, but, habitually suspicious of people, he said to himself:

"A stupid face. He must be a petticoat hunter."

Closely scrutinizing the young man, who was poorly dressed in a blue blouse, a duck jacket, and trousers of the same material worn over his top boots, Bykov, wincing with pain, enquired of his nephew in a matter-of-fact way how old he was, what his occupation was, how he spent his spare time, and so forth. It transpired that Yakov was nineteen.

en years old, was a salesman in a timber yard, sang first tenor in the church choir, and was fond of fishing and reading. Listening to the lad calmly relating all this, Bykov thought to himself resentfully:

"He talks as if he were at confession. He must be lying. He has guessed why I have called him, and is pretending to be a goody-goody."

Involuntarily he blurted out with a crooked smile on his sallow face:

"I am dying!"

And he heard the lad answer:

"Why should you say that?"

"What do you mean, why?" Bykov asked in surprise and anger. "I'm very sick!"

And then he said emphatically to himself:

"That boy's a fool!"

But Yakov Somov went on to speak in a soothing persuasive tone that sounded strange to Bykov.

"There's a cure for every illness," he said "Carrot juice, for example. A year ago I got consumption, and our choir-master's mother, a very kind and wise old lady, suggested that I should drink a glass of carrot juice every morning on an empty stomach. I did, and I got well."

Smiling pleasantly, Somov passed his hand down his throat and chest, and Bykov felt as if the calm words his nephew was uttering were easing his pain.

"You had consumption, but I have something else," he said.

"But consumption is a disease too. You must certainly try carrot juice, or horse-radish pickled in alcohol. Horse-radish is better, because it contains saltpetre, and saltpetre is the best thing against decay. When fish is salted they add saltpetre to prevent them from decaying. All disease is a product of decay, you know."

It was exceedingly pleasant to hear Yakov Somov speaking. The words poured from his lips like fine sand, and buried Bykov's distrust of his nephew's youthfulness.

"How do you know all this?" he asked him

Yakov eagerly, as if relating it to an old friend, told Bykov about a friend he had had, an educated man and a splendid angler, who had committed suicide the previous autumn.

"Why did he do that?"

"Because of unrequited love....."

"Commit suicide—that's silly!"

"He was straightforward."

"What's that?"

"He was straightforward in his feelings"

"Ah!" said Bykov to himself. "He's a queer lad Talkative. He's young, of course....."

And so, quite a time passed in this light conversation until Somov, glancing at the slow-moving hands of the clock on the wall, said that it was time for him to go for rehearsal, and after respectfully taking leave, he went away.

Yegor Bykov stretched out on a couch and became lost in thought. *Long conversations always tired him.* What was there to talk about? You can see at once what a man wants of you, and you always know what you want of him. But this one was different, even though he was a boy. He was modest and made no reference to his relationship with Bykov. He did not call him uncle once, although he certainly knew his uncle was quite alone. Perhaps it was only his craftiness? But it didn't look like it.

Kickin came back from the warehouse, where he had been taking in a consignment of hemp, sat down at the table, tired and perspiring, and asked:

"Was he here?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"You can't tell at first sight but he seems to be friendly."

Kickin poured out the tea, and hungrily and greedily chewing bread and sausage, listened closely to his master's musing.

"He's one of the soothing sort. They are deceivers. I don't trust 'em. Nor the friendly ones either—they're not the quality for me. People are accustomed to live as if the

Lord had sent them to make a laughing stock of each other."

"That's true!" said the hunchback feelingly. All his life he had been mercilessly ridiculed for his deformity.

"That's the whole point! And the Devil sets us against each other like fighting cocks. People sin and the Devil laughs, but nobody knows what God's intentions are. The Lord, like the police-officer in the theatre, looks on and says nothing .. ."

Bykov went on talking in this resentful tone for some time and then, wearily closing his eyes, he asked:

"What have you heard about him Yakov, I mean."

Kickin spread some honey on a slice of bread, turned round together with his chair, and reported:

"His master, Titov, says that he is an industrious lad, but he sometimes lets his imagination run away with him"

"What does he mean?"

Titov couldn't explain, but as far as I could understand, Yakov is inclined to do things he ought not to. I asked the Deacon about him, and he can't praise him enough. But, of course, you can't believe what he says, because they are friends, they go fishing together. His landlady told me that he drinks only in company, and the company he keeps are a poor lot—the foundrymen at Kononov's, mechanics and the barber .. ."

"You don't expect him to keep company with the City Governor, do you?"

"He doesn't bring any women home. He likes cleanliness and order, and he's kind"

"Kind?"

"Yes"

"That's because he's young! Well, well . . . He must be aware that you've been making enquiries about him and must guess why I called him, don't you think so?"

"I doubt it. I was very careful"

Bykov stopped talking and thought for a while. Then he said:

"Well, what's to be done? I suppose it's got to be. Still,

make some more enquiries about him. And tell him to come here again. Say that I forgot to invite him."

And then he exclaimed in a tone of gloomy vexation:

"But just think what's happened to me! I slaved and slaved, and accumulated so many sins on my soul—but for whom? For a stranger, a milksop! What do you think of that, eh?"

"It's a bad joke," the hunchback said emphatically, blinking his round eyes.

Bykov's illness seemed to have been waiting for the doctor's verdict, for after the latter's visit it took a rapid turn for the worse. The dull pain in his side increased. His mind became confused, and he felt as though the maggots of sorrow and resentment were tirelessly wriggling and gnawing in every part of his body.

"How's things?" enquired Kickin.

Boykov growled in his surly manner:

"Hard. Thi, is the first time I'm dying I'm not used to it yet."

He was fond of a joke and could crack a good one himself. This gift stood him in good stead when the people he had wronged reviled and swore at him

"It was God's will that I should get the better of you," he would say on such occasions

He was not in the mood for jesting now, however. It was from sheer force of habit that he, as always, had jeered at Kickin, who was impervious to ridicule. He remained on his couch for whole days with his head in the corner, under the icon, feeling that it was becoming hollow like a drum, empty of all thought except one:

"I'm dying. Why?"

Now and again, to drown this thought, he muttered the half-forgotten words of the prayer:

"Lord, God, Almighty..... deliver me from all torment, preserve me from wickedness.... from evil spirits, of the day and of the night,....."

But he found that far from helping him to resign himself to the will of God, to the inevitability of his untimely death,

these words only intensified his sense of wrong and suffering.

He got up, and throwing a grey dressing gown over his shoulders, he walked past the mirror to the blue, bottomless pit of the window. The mirror, as he passed it, reflected a tall, gaunt figure, ashen face, dull eyes and matted beard like those of a man in jail. He picked up a comb from the dressing table, sat down in the armchair, combed his hair and beard, and then sat gazing into the street, at the houses, separated by thickly-planted gardens, solidly built and strong, calculated to last for centuries.

The street was hot, quiet, and deserted. The neighbours had all left for their country houses, and the janitors were idling at the gates. It was very quiet except for the birds twittering in the gardens; but this did not disturb his bitter thoughts of God's injustice.

"Those houses, for example," he mused, "those brick human nests, built on foundations that lie deep in the ground, will stand for an incalculable time but man, the builder of houses, who beautifies the earth with the labour of his hands, is condemned to die within a short space of time. Why? Why is Yegor Ivanov Bykov, Cavalier of the Order of St. George and Merchant of the Second Guild, who has not yet lived half a century, condemned to an untimely death? Is he more sinful than others? And should a man be condemned to death for being a sinner?"

The sick man felt better on the evenings when Yekov Somov came. His nephew's conversation distracted him from his gloomy thoughts and aroused acute interest in this young man, a desire to understand him. It also aroused burning envy of him, because he would live long, lead a quiet life and be rich, and all as a result of another's labours. He would be able to live without sinning. Wasn't that unjust? And even ridiculous and silly?

Yakov's conversation was indeed extremely interesting, and often Bykov was pleasantly surprised by their novelty. But to him it seemed that the views his nephew expressed were a strange compound of folly and wisdom. This prevented him from arriving at a definite opinion about his nephew, although he was in a hurry to form that opinion.

"Is he foolish by nature, or because of his youth?" he would ask himself as he listened to Yakov. The latter smiled pensively and said:

"It's dull to live as other people live, but it is hard to live differently."

"That's so," agreed Bykov. "But people are not all alike."

And he was extremely vexed when this good-looking lad, who while not actually challenging that last remark, nevertheless went on to say with emphasis:

"They're all alike in the main thing, if you look into it properly."

"What is the main thing?"

"Wanting to live on the fruits of other people's labour."

Bykov silently stroked his beard and thought about the matter. Yes, his nephew was right. But he himself will be living on the fruits of his, Bykov's, labour. Did he understand that, or not? If he understood it, then he was arguing against his own interests and was therefore a fool. And if he did not understand it, he was a fool, just the same.

Trying to probe down to the very essence of Yokov's character, he said:

"Life, little brother, is like war. Its law is very simple: Don't miss your opportunity!"

"That's quite true. And that's the cause of all the trouble."

"But trouble cannot be avoided!"

Yakov smiled, but said nothing.

"Bykov thought that the smile, on his nephew's virginal face was inopportune, unjustified, unnecessary, and that there was something offensively condescending about it."

"He thinks he's clever," he thought to himself, peering at Yakov through his half-closed eyes.

What he disliked still more was when Somov stopped talking in the middle of a conversation and remained silent with lowered eyes, fingering his teaspoon, or a button on his coat; remained silent like a man who had something very important to say but did not wish to say it.

Once this silence so infuriated Bykov that he burst out hoarsely:

"Do you understand what I'm saying to you, or don't you?"

Yakov answered politely, even guiltily:

"I understand, but I don't agree!"

"Why not!"

"I have a different opinion"

"What opinion? Out with it! Talk and argue! Why do you keep quiet?"

Yakov answered in the same polite tone:

"I don't like to argue. And besides, I can't. In my opinion, argument only perpetuates disagreement among men"

"So people ought to keep quiet! Is that what you mean?"

Yakov ignored this question and went on to explain:

"People argue not in order to find the truth, but rather to conceal it," he said "The truth that has been given to men is very simple: Become as little children. Love thy neighbour as thyself. It is disgraceful to argue against that."

"He's a saint!" thought Bykov in vexation, and he laughed sardonically, although the laugh increased his pain

"Well, can you be like a child? Can you love your neighbour? Tell me! Ekh! Just now you agreed that life was like war, and now . . . That won't do, little brother. That's weak!"

Unabashed by this banter, Yakov said with quiet persistence:

"After all, there is no other way of averting unhappiness, and people ought to turn their thoughts in this direction."

"Where to? Which direction?"

"In the direction of living simply, like children"

"You are a fool, young man! Children are the most vicious creatures on earth, don't you know that? Watch them, and see how they pummel each other like little savages!"

The nephew smiled, but said nothing

Bykov wanted to upbraid him but restrained himself. Moaning with pain he said gloomily:

"All right. Go! I'm tired."

He sat down at the window, and watching the reddish clouds casting their glare over the gardens he became lost in thought.

"A queer lad!" he mused. "His brain is full of jelly. He's like a shadow, you can't get hold of him, nohow."

"Oh, Lord! Riddles, riddles everywhere.. .

"He eats slowly. That's a bad sign. Lazy people eat slowly. And he eats little, bites off small pieces like a gentleman, and chews his food for a long time like an old man, although his teeth are quite sound. And he is pensive. What's he got to think about at his age? And he walks pensively too, as if he were in a strange land. There is something of the 'beautiful maiden' in his face, and if it wasn't for his forelock he'd look quite like a girl."

"Become as little children the fool! Try to live like that! Perhaps he isn't a fool, but simply softhearted. He hasn't been through the mill and his heart hasn't been hardened. And being young, the lad thinks he'll be able to go through life without being wronged or wronging others; without sin. That wouldn't be bad; but it's impossible!"

Bykov's thoughts ran over his own hard life and he became so filled with pity for himself that he felt he could spare a modicum of this pity for his nephew.

"He knows that it is hard to live differently from the way other people live, and he ought to know that life without sin is like porridge w'thout butter. It would be dry. A man wants to sleep on a soft bed. Still, Yakov is a pleasant fellow, and he must have some Bykov blood in his veins."

But when Kickin came Bykov said sarcastically:

"Well, brother, my heir is not one of the perky sort. No! He's a saint! We must become as little children, he says. D'you hear that?"

"That's from the Bible," the hunchback said diffidently.

"What?"

"From the Bible. Christ there....."

Bykov growled angrily, putting his hand to his aching side he hissed between his clenched teeth:

"Christ is the Son of God, but I am the son of Ivan Bykov, a peasant. That makes a lot of difference! Christ didn't deal in hemp, and he didn't live among us"

His anger rose, and banging his fist on the leather arm of his armchair he continued:

"If you want to live like Christ, take off your coat and boots and walk in sackcloth and barefoot! And cut off that forelock!"

Excitement tired him. He winced with pain and stopped speaking. After a while he growled at Kickin:

"And you too mumble: Christ, Christ! Christ is no companion for a hunchback. No. Do you hear? Birds, which are of no use to anyone, may sing, but a man must die. Christ was not aware of that"

Kickin said, cautiously, prompting Bykov:

"In the garden of Gethsemane Christ also complained about his fate."

Bykov was delighted to hear this and he began to talk again, rapidly and excitedly:

"That's so! I remember that! There you are! He didn't like to die before his time. And I am only human."

He groaned with pain, sank more deeply in his armchair, and stretching out his legs, said in a plaintive voice:

"Well, what's to be done, Kickin? Into whose hands will my property fall? This is downright mockery. I saved, and scraped, and sinned, and now all at once everything is to be thrown into the garbage pit. What?"

He went on in this strain for a long time, complainingly and angrily, extending his arm one moment and tapping the flower pots on the window sill another. Kickin listened to him with bowed head, drumming his fingers on the angular knee of his bandy legs. After a while he said:

"On the other hand, if Yakov is not to have the property, and if charitable institutions are not to have it, then it will be escheated, and the government will take it . . ."

Bykov clicked his teeth and said laughing:

"It sounds as if I've been deprived of all rights and condemned to life-long penal servitude!"

"Exactly. That's the joke."

"Funny, isn't it?"

"There's no other way"

Both remained silent for a long time, each racking his brains to find another way out. At last the hunchback advised Bykov to invite Yakov Somov to come and live in the house, and while he was there to watch him more closely and teach him how to live. "Perhaps," he said, "the lad will settle down when he feels the responsibilities imposed upon him by the possession of property."

They decided to do this

The rain beat against the windowpanes, the wind howled, and when the glassy twilight of the street was lit up by flashes of lightning and a bluish-grey light broke into the darkened room, it seemed as though the flower pots were falling off the window sill, and as if everything in the room, shuddered and started moving across the floor to the white patch of the door.

The logs were burning brightly in the tiled stove. Yegor Bykov was sitting at the open grate, warming his cold feet, and warm, reddish patches flitted over his grey dressing gown, his knees and chest, lighting up part of his beard, but leaving his face in the shade, a blind face with closed eyes.

Kickin was sitting awkwardly huddled up on a low footstool with his arms folded over his pigeon chest, looking up into Yakov's face with a queer look in his eyes, which reflected the flickering flames. Yakov was leaning against the stove and speaking in a low, even voice, as if he were telling a story:

"The more property is accumulated, the more envy and hatred grow among men. The poor see this enormous wealth"

"Uhu!" exclaimed Bykov, opening his eyes. Kickin heaved a sigh, picked up the poker and stirred the fire in the stove. The wood crackled and a shower of burning embers dropped onto the copper sheet in front of the stove.

Bykov put out his foot to extinguish the embers and glowered. How ugly and unpleasant everything seemed to him! Kickin's face looked like a battered leather ball, tufts of grey hair protruded from his skull, his frog-like mouth was open with astonishment, and his ears were like those of a wild animal, like the Devil's. Yakov looked like a picture drawn on the white tiles, and although he was dressed well, everything he had on was new, it did not make him look any more attractive.

"Well?" Bykov asked ironically. "So you think the poor will dare to rob the rich, is that it?"

"There must be a fair division of wealth . . ."

"Is that so?" said Bykov. "Is that so? Those are queer ideas you've got in your head, brother!"

"That's what millions think."

"Have you counted them?"

It's true. The people are angry," said Kickin, cautiously, gazing into the fire. "They are all every discontented."

Bykov raised his eyebrows in an unnatural way and growled:

"You shut up! I'm not saying anything, am I?"

It was not yet two months since Yakov had moved into the house, but Bykov noticed that the hunchback was more and more often cautiously expressing agreement with Yakov's arguments, and that he looked at the lad in an obsequious way. The cat was evidently scenting its new master.

"What people, eh!" groaned Bykov in utter disgust.

And his nephew was either exceedingly foolish, or else extremely crafty. It was hard to say what he was after. He spoke so suavely and endearingly, and evidently wanted imperceptibly, to make people agree with him that the root of all unhappiness in life, the root of all its evils, lay in wealth. This was a deformed, a hunchback idea, and did not suit Yakov at all. He was obviously playing the hypocrite. But why? He knew that he would be rich when his uncle died, and he did not in the least look like a philanthropist who would give all his wealth to the poor. He displayed the habits of a businessman, showed respect for property, and

had a passion for order and cleanliness. He soon made the janitor hustle and helped him to clean up the neglected courtyard; took stock of the goods in the warehouse and found that the salesman had been stealing. He obviously had no liking for beggars.

But still, he was a mystery. You couldn't get to the bottom of him, find out what he really was. And that forelock of his. He had a stubborn forelock like that sticking inside his noddle, in his brain.

What if he is talking all this extraordinary, disgusting heresy deliberately, to confuse and irritate a sick man in order to drive him into his grave the sooner? This thought alarmed Bykov as it flashed through his mind, and one day he bluntly asked Yakov:

"Why do you talk all this nonsense?"

"To make things clear," answered the nephew, opening wide his sheep-like eyes. His eyes were double too. Sometimes they looked so soft and kind; but most often they were fixed and dull, as if they were sightless—this was always the case when he talked his heresies.

"We must have clarity," he said. "All people must unite closely for their mutual assistance"

"Unite! Against whom?" retorted Bykov in a hoarse, angry voice. "Where's the enemy? The enemy lies within the people themselves. Don't you understand that?"

"It is wrong to live in strife," answered the boy obstinately. "Is it not said: If you sow the wind you will reap the whirlwind? The public conscience must be appeased, otherwise there will be a nationwide rebellion... .."

"That's a lie!" shouted Bykov in a rage.

Day and night he asked himself whether Yakov was fit to be his heir, or not. These thoughts distracted his mind from the thought of death, and at times it even seemed to him that his pain was retreating before them.

"He's a mysterious fellow. Very mysterious! Every beggar knows that man's real fortress and protection in life is wealth, property. Even moles grubbing underground know that"

At night, when everything on earth was wrapped in silence as if pondering over the departed day, when the thoughts of men becoming more ponderous, were almost visible and the tight skein of the mind, slowly unwinding, stretched its dark threads in all directions, Bykov, listening intently, guessed that the two upstairs were also awake. He even thought he could hear Yakov's persistent voice and see his eyes, and the look of amazement on the hunch-back's wrinkled face. Evidently Yakov was talking about reforming the Constitution and of the necessity of restricting the power of the tsar. That whelp even dared to talk about things like that!

People had talked in whispers about this during the Turkish war, and they had begun to think like this again because war had broken out again. It was the civilians stirring up trouble because they didn't want to fight, were afraid of being called to arms. At the time of the Turkish war they even tried to kill the tsar but missed the opportunity, so they killed him after the war.

"But that's all nonsense! Joshua went to war. King David was a meek man and wrote psalms, and yet he could not help going to war. Monks went to war. Pious princes fought the Tatars. Saint Alexander Nevsky mercilessly beat the Swedes. But none of these were killed by their own people. What utter nonsense!"

Tired of the couch, Bykov got up and sat down by the window and gazed at the stars and at the chubby, womanish face of the moon. The sky, though gaudily decked with stars, exuded melancholy. He went on musing:

"Father Fyodor, the priest at the Cathedral, was fond of saying that people did not admire enough the wonderful magnificence of the sky, but all the same he cheated at cards and nobody wanted to play with him."

He recalled the quarrel he had had with the priest after he had told him that there was nothing magnificent about the sky, that it reminded him of man's insignificance, and that it looked much better in the daytime when it was bare and lit up by the sun. The sky was more pleasant at

night when it was hidden by clouds and you couldn't see it, and it seemed as if it wasn't there. Man was created for the earth, and when priests tried to take his mind off it, it was like dragging a conscript bridegroom from his wedding feast to the barracks. The priest had gone into a rage over that.....

The trees in the gardens had so closely merged with the darkness that it seemed as though somebody had dipped them in tar. The town was excruciatingly silent, so silent that one wanted to shout:

"Fire! Fire!"

"Lord, Lord! Why hast thou punished me?" groaned Bykov mentally. "Am I more sinful than other men?"

He reviewed the behaviour of his acquaintances. They were all worse than he, all more avaricious, and more covetous. He had a conscience; that is why he had never acquired intimate friends. He had lived his life alone, unhurriedly building himself a durable nest in which to lead a quiet life with a good and beautiful wife. It was good to have a handsome, buxom woman by one's side, to dress her like a doll, to go out with her on holidays, to ride with her in a carriage and pair and show off her finery, the jewels that ornamented her ample bosom. and thereby rouse the envy of all the other women! Yes, that was good!

Screwing up his eyes he peered through the twilight at the heavy furniture in the room and recalled with what hopes he had bought it. Property is of great importance; with it a man lives as if in a fortress. If all the furniture were taken out of the room, the room would look like a large coffin.

"Oh, why? Oh, why? Oh, Lord?"

And all the time he was musing he thought he heard Yakov's voice in the hunchback's garret, whirring like a sewing machine, softly embroidering with words the pattern of his heresies.

"He sticks to his opinions. That's not bad, even if the opinions are childish. When I was young I didn't know what I wanted."

Imperceptibly Bykov's thoughts assumed a different hue.

In any case, he had no other heir but Yakov. That was his luck! But he at once felt that this was irrational, and so he tried to invent some justification for it; but he could find none better than that the boy was modest and sober, and that he would grow wiser when he became rich.

When, for a brief moment, he stopped thinking of Somov as his heir and thought of him only as the lad he was, he really liked him. He felt with astonishment that in his nephew's queer, obstinate ideas, there was a reason different to the one which had guided his own life, a reason alien to him, but one that flowed from a heart unshadowed by life, that flowed from a strong belief in something. Often, observing how the involved and sometimes incomprehensible words of his nephew formed themselves into understandable ideas, he almost envied him, and he deliberately frowned in order to hide his involuntary smile. He thought to himself:

"Clever, isn't he? He's only a fledgeling, but how sweetly he sings! But when he gets my feathers, he'll sing a different song. It's easy for him, the little beast."

He liked particularly to hear Yakov speak about his former employer, Titov, to hear what an awful drunkard he was. Listening to him relate these stories about Titov, he even laughed heartily, opening his mouth wide and exposing his teeth, snorting and closing his eyes tight with pleasure. It was pleasant to see his enemy made to look ridiculous and pitiful, and pleasant to feel that his heir's keen, vigilant eyes saw the weaknesses and deformities of men.

"You are observant! That's useful. It's always useful to see which leg man is lame on. If it's the left, strike at the right, and if it's the right, strike at the left."

And Yakov related in his clear voice the following:

"When Titov gets one of these fits and goes on the booze, he meets Baltiski, the engineer, and for about ten days they indulge in trick drinking. What they do is this: They send Christopher, the manservant, into the garden at night to bury about twenty bottles of wine and vodka in different spots so that even the necks of the bottles don't show. Next morning the two go into the garden with their walking-

sticks to 'pick mushrooms,' that is to say, they scour the ground with their sticks and when they find a bottle of vodka they cry out joyously: 'A White!' They go into the arbour and empty the bottle. After that they go to look for more 'mushrooms.' When they find a bottle of red wine they call it a 'Red cap.' If it's a bottle of champagne they call it 'Champignon.' If it's a bottle of cognac they call it a 'Yellow cap,' and if it's a bottle of liqueur they call it a 'Browny.' And so they go on, all day long, searching for bottles and drinking in the order in which they find them. Sometimes they will start the day with liqueur, drink one bottle and then go out for another. They get so drunk that Titov crawls on the grass on all fours like King Nebuchadnezzar and sings the air from the opera 'Demon':

*I am he whom no one loves,
By all living beings accursed.....*

And Baltiski lies on the ground weeping bitterly because he cannot unearth a bottle with his teeth and moans and wails:

"Where's all my strength gone? Where's all my strength gone?"

Bykov laughed, although the laughter increased the gnawing pain in his side, but Somov went on speaking in an obvious tone of regret:

"It makes you laugh, of course; but still, I'm sorry for such men. They possess enormous strength. They could move mountains, you know! But they only work with two fingers. It's not true when they say that people are greedy. No. I don't see any greed in their work!"

"You are young and that's why you don't see much," said Bykov, only in order to contradict, but to himself he thought:

"I can't understand the lad. When he talks about business he reasons like a businessman. What he says is true. People are not greedy in their work. They're lazy! But it all sounds so absurd, so unusual. Fancy an employee regretting that his employer is not doing his work well. He says that people should work conscientiously. But if you want to

make people work conscientiously, with all their might, you've got to knock all these childish ideas out of your mind!"

"Your ideas are all mixed up, Yakov," he said to his nephew with gloomy vexation "You are not logical You are too flighty ..."

Somov stopped talking, lowered his eyes, and tried to flatten his forelock but only made it stand up all the more

Suddenly the merchants in the town became alarmed over something and for whole days they dashed about the street in their carriages, looking very grave Bykov, sitting at the window, watched these restless movements of men who were not accustomed to hurry themselves, and he asked Kickin:

"What are they dashing about like that for?"

He had noticed, too, that the hunchback's usually gloomy face had brightened and his chicken-like eyes had lost their painful clearness. This despised little creature had even begun to walk with a firmer step, and no longer waddled on his bandy-legs as he used to do Now, when he walked, it seemed as though he had springs inside him, in his hump Blinking his eyes rapidly, now spreading out his arms and now tugging at his braces, he related something that was absolutely incomprehensible, something about an unprecedented public scandal, in which the City Duma, the Artisan Administration, the merchants, the nobility and even the clergy were involved

"I tell you, Yegor Ivanich, it's a huge joke," he said

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed Bykov. "Is the Governor in town?"

"Of course"

"Is the tsar alive?"

"Quite"

"So what's the matter?"

Kickin smiled an ugly smile, quite unusual for him, and enquired:

"What are you asking about?"

"Fool!"

Yakov would no doubt have told him about what was going on in town, in a more intelligible manner, but he had asked leave to go to Moscow, and had been hanging out there for over a week, seeing the sights of the capital. But the town was becoming more and more filled with an unusual excitement and murmur, like that heard during Easter week, or when there was a big fire somewhere.

"What's going on?" he demanded of Kickin angrily.

"You see what it is, Yegor Ivanovich. The people are demanding"

"Wait a minute! Don't rattle away like that! What people? The peasants?"

"The peasants too"

"Whattoo?"

"They're demanding land."

"From whom?"

"Well, you see...."

And then the hunchback began to talk utter twaddle. Wriggling on his chair like a crab in boiling water, and smiling guiltily, he mumbled:

"Everybody is demanding an account from everybody else....."

He rubbed his hands. A light of intoxicated joy, which contradicted the alarming story, he was telling, shone in his eyes, and he irritatingly stamped and scraped his crooked feet under the table. Then he blurted out:

"Universal discontent has raised its voice. Minds have sobered and everybody is agreed that it is impossible to go on living in this way ..."

"Which way, you hunch-backed devil?"

"The way we are living now! Everything is being talked about quite fearlessly, and some people talk as if they have been asleep up to now and everything in the past has been only a dream to them. This is God's truth! Determination and perseverance."

The hunchback was sitting sideways towards Bykov with his beardless, a red face turned towards him. His faded jacket had slipped up to his pointed hump, exposing his

white shirt, inflated like a bladder, and his braces His trousers were bespattered with mud almost up to the knees.

"What a miserable creature I am living with," thought Bykov.

"It's a huge joke, Yegor Ivanich!" continued Kickin. "Everybody's in the street, and crowding around the Duma . . ."

"Go to the Devil!"

Left alone, Bykov mused:

"A miserable worm like that, and yet he upsets me! I'll give him some money and tell him to clear out. Now that I've got Yakov, I don't need him . . ."

Yakov arrived in the evening of a rainy day and came down to tea looking very solemn, as if he had come back from communion in church. There was a strained look in his face, his forelock stuck up more obstinately than ever, his brows were drawn over his eyes as if he were troubled by something, and his voice was low and hoarse. He did not sit down to table in his usual modest way, but pushed the chair up with his foot. This increased Bykov's alarm and roused in him a foreboding of evil.

"Well, how's things in Moscow?"

Clipping each word in an unpleasant way, his nephew began to talk thoughtfully, but in an unusually loud voice, as if he were taking an oath in court before giving evidence. He talked for a long time, ignoring his uncle's angry questions, and often pausing to recall something, or to think of an appropriate word.

"He's lying! Trying to frighten me," thought Bykov, offended by Yakov's failure to answer his questions, and angrily watching the hunchback impatiently wriggling in his chair and opening his frog's mouth, evidently wanting to put in a word here and there.

"They're hand in glove with each other, the devils . . ."

Yakov related something that was absolutely incredible. All classes, for some reason, had suddenly risen in anger, and were demanding an amelioration of their conditions, each in conformity with its interests, and everybody wanted to fight everybody else, as if they were drunk.

"Well, what's going to come of it?" enquired Bykov, suspiciously and angrily.

Somov thought for a moment, sighed audibly, and said: "Something bad will come of it if we do not achieve a universal awakening of conscience and mutual aid. I am very sorry to have to cause you any anxiety, Yegor Ivanich, but I cannot conceal from you that there may be a complete armed revolution."

"That's a lie!" said Bykov, firmly and emphatically "Where are they going to get the arms from? It's a lie! You are taking advantage of the fact that I am sick and can't go into the street... You're trying to frighten me. To kill me with fright."

Banging his fist on the table, so hard that the cups and saucers jumped, he shouted hoarsely, while his eyes bulged:

"I'm not an old woman! I don't believe the world's coming to an end! You can't frighten me! I'm not afraid of anything! While I'm alive—the property's mine. ..."

He stopped speaking when his nephew, blushing deeply, turned round towards him with his chair and, coughing hoarsely, said slowly and distinctly, as if he were hammering nails into a board:

"In that case let me talk to you quite frankly. You suspect me of coveting your property. Konstantin Dmitrievich, here, has told me about it. You are wrong, and your opinion deeply offends me. I don't want your wealth I decline it I am even ready to make a written statement that I will not accept the legacy I will write it this very night and hand it to you. I came to live with you here only because you are a sick and lonely man and you found it dull I know that you are a better man than many others, because you are straightforward and possess other good qualities. You could quite legally have ruined Becker, the high school teacher, and have reduced him to beggary, and also the Kasimirsky girls, but you did not do so. That is why I respect you, and it explains why I have lived in your house. But I can't live with you any longer! Farewell!"

"Yakov's voice was quite hoarse by now, and he finished

speaking almost in a whisper. He coughed, got up from his chair and went to the door, saying as he went:

"Of course, I am very grateful, but I am sorry . . ."

"Wait!" shouted Bykov, tightening the girdle of his dressing gown and, for some reason, raising the tassels to his shoulders "Wait! Don't be so hotheaded!" But Yakov was already gone. Bykov then got up, extended his arms, and holding the ends of his girdle as if they were reins, he shouted to Kickin:

"Bring him back!"

The hunchback jumped up, spun round and vanished

"What do you think of that, eh!" mumbled Bykov audibly, gazing at the door in amazement and listening to the whispering he heard on the staircase leading to the upper floor. What astonished him was not Yakov's refusal of the legacy, but the fact that he knew about Becker, that silly fellow who had fallen into the clutches of a usurer, and about the beautiful Kasimirska sisters who had been almost ruined by their dissipated father

"I respect you," he said! He is offended! Why he's still, a child!"

When Somov came back into the room Bykov laughed disconcertedly and said.

"You are a queer fellow! Why did you flare up like that, eh? Come here and sit down! The legacy is yours, not only because I want it to be yours but also because you have a legal right to it"

Yakov, leaning on the back of a chair, said firmly:

"I don't want to talk about the legacy."

"You don't? Do you really mean it?"

"Yes, I mean it Soon, perhaps all legacies will be abolished"

"What's that?" Bykov asked, swinging the tassels of his girdle "Sit down!"

He felt as he had never felt before; as a hungry beggar must feel when he unexpectedly receives a savoury meal

"You must not be angry with a sick man!" he continued. "Nobody can deprive you of the legacy The law wouldn't permit it"

Yakov sat down and said:

"That law should be abolished. It only causes a lot of unhappiness."

"All right, we'll abolish it," said Bykov jestingly, looking closely at his heir. It seemed to him that Yakov was unwell. His girlish face was drawn, his lips were livid, and he kept licking them. His eyes were hollow and looked gloomy and dull.

"You have a temperature, haven't you?"

"No," answered Yakov, stroking his forelock. "Only I want you to be serious. There is a big movement of the people against the rich, and some are demanding that all their wealth be taken away... . . ."

"Don't be afraid," said Bykov confidently. "Don't be afraid. Nobody will take it away!"

"I'm not afraid. I myself am in favour of it....."

Bykov, with a rattling sound in his throat, drew as much air into his lungs as he possibly could and audibly exhaling it together with the pain began to talk slowly and distinctly, like the priest Fyodor preaching a sermon:

"A man without property is a bare bone; property is his flesh. Do you understand? Flesh!"

He brought the palm of his hand down smartly upon the leather arm of his armchair and repeated:

"Flesh! And a man lives in order to build up his flesh, to the utter fulfillment of all his desires. The world exists for the fulfillment of desires, and that is the object of all human endeavour. He who wants little is worth little .."

"Yes, and now everybody wants everything," Yakov interrupted with a smile.

"What's that? What do they want? Don't believe what they say, believe what they do. It's not enough to want things, you must make them. When there will be plenty of everything there will be enough for everybody, and everybody will be contented."

And then Bykov went on to say in the mildest tone he could command:

"I'm not a fool. I understand. You want everybody to live like Christ, simply and purely. It's true that Christ

wanted to have everything shared out equally, but he lived in a poor world, whereas we are living in a rich one. In Christ's time there were not so many people, and their wants were little, but still there was not enough for all. But now we have become greedier. There's so many of us now, and everybody wants everything. That being the case: Work, save and accumulate ."

Bykov himself was astonished at the thoughts he uttered. They had arisen suddenly and independently of himself. They had come like strangers, but interesting strangers. This disconcerted him. But one of the thoughts seemed to him to be wise and true, one that easily solved the sinful confusion of life. And listening to himself speak he went on to say:

"First of all, then, we must work and save, and then share out equally, even with cripples who are unfit for anything. They must have a share too, so that there shall be no poverty, and no squalour, and not even a shadow of sin. Yes, that's how it should be. Everybody should have enough to eat, everybody should live to the best of his ability, and nobody should be covetous, or design evil against others. Every man should be holy in himself. Yes! That's right! Every man should be a saint."

Bykov went on talking and became more and more amazed as he felt that his train of thought was developing without end, and that he so easily found the words he needed. It even began to seem to him that the tight skein of these ideas had long, always, lain rolled up at the bottom of his soul, and that today it had begun to unwind, releasing an endless thread of immense strength. This unwinding of the skein made Bykov grasp for breath, as if he were riding swiftly over a smooth road in the winter. He expressed these new-found words with extraordinary ease, as if he had always thought them. It was pleasant to feel oneself so unusually clever, and to see the hunchback listening and smiling with an intoxicated smile, and Yakov bending over the chair looking at him so fondly with the eyes of a girl. And all this was so touching, the consciousness that he could feel the forces which bound men together was so thrilling,

that tears welled up in Bykov's eyes, and overcome by weakness, he leaned against the back of his armchair and mumbled, wearily closing his eyes:

"Who finds any pleasure in doing evil to men? But the need, the inescapable need to work is great, oh, so great! And we must hurry—for death awaits us all....."

Kickin jumped up from his chair and said in a tone of anxiety:

"You're tired, Yegor Ivanich. Go and lie down. Yasha—let's take him to bed!"

Supporting Bykov by the arms, they led him to his bed, tenderly laid him into it and noiselessly departed, the hunchback hobbling in front and Yakov following him with bent head, stroking his forelock

Wrapped in the warm cloud of care bestowed upon him by Kickin and Yakov, Bykov, for several days, lived in the unusual state of solemn exaltation that one feels on a birthday. He lost a great deal of strength during those days and it was found necessary to hire a nurse to look after him, a tall, silent woman, as thin as a pole, with a pock marked face and colourless eyes. Resignedly feeling his strength oozing out, Bykov saw through the haze of his exalted mood that Kickin's sallow face was careworn and that his eyes were restless with anxiety; that Yakov too had become more reticent, and that his face was pale and gloomy. He disappeared several times a day, and when he came back he talked of events reluctantly, and with great reserve.

"They are sorry for me," thought Bykov. "They are both sorry for me. They don't want to disturb me. Evidently my end is drawing near."

"But the thought of death frightened him now still less than it had done before. His resentment at the thought that he was dying had lessened, had become less bitter, although he could not help thinking to himself: "If only I could live with Yakov a little longer. And Kickin is a good fellow too. They understand me now. I opened my soul to them, and they understood me."

And laughing to himself he thought about his heir:

"I proved to him how wealth should be regarded, and now the lad is upset because he had said: share it out among the poor! What do you think of people, eh?"

"What's going on in town?" he asked the nurse, wishing to verify Kickin's confused and his nephew's laconic information.

"They're still in rebellion," answered the woman in a tone of indifference, as if rebellion was an everyday affair among the people of this city, like getting drunk, and buying and selling goods. Every now and again she yawned, covering her mouth with the palm of her hand; and then she rapidly crossed herself. Sleep was concealed in her colourless eyes, and her noiseless footsteps were as lithe as a cat's.

The shooting began in the city between Saturday and Sunday, at the dawn of a dull rainy day. The first shots were fired somewhere far away and sounded subdued in the rain-saturated air.

Bykov listened to the firing for several minutes. It sounded as if a crow were pecking at the wet sheet iron of a roof. He woke the nurse and asked her:

"What's that tapping?"

The nurse raised her head like a snake, looked through the grey squares of the windowpanes, listened for a moment and said:

"I don't know. Shall I give you your medicine?"

"Shut up!"

The tapping became more persistent and drew nearer. Soon it sounded like the clicking of the beads of an abacus in the hands of a skilful clerk.

"It sounds like rifle fire," said Bykov gloomily. Old soldier that he was he was certain that it was rifle fire. "Go up and wake the others," he said to the nurse.

The nurse went off, tucking loose strands of hair under her kerchief and swaying in the twilight, as if she were being buffeted by the wind. Bykov sat down on his bed, straining his ears, and stroking his hair and beard with trembling hands.

"They're shooting, the sons-of bitches! I wonder who is shooting, and whom they're shooting at?"

The nurse came running down the stairs in great alarm and almost before she reached the door she shrieked in her silly squeaky voice :

"They're shooting! At your roof!"

"Fool!" said Bykov sternly. "They're firing blank cartridges."

"Oh, no, they're not!"

"Shut up! That's manoeuvres. They're not allowed to fire ball cartridges in town"

"Oh, no, good master, you're wrong!"

The woman ran to the window and opened it. Rattling sounds burst into the room. Bykov recognized the sounds as that of rifle and revolver fire. Suddenly a bomb exploded. The tinkle of broken glass was heard and sinister flashes were reflected in the windows of the house opposite. The woman sank to the floor, crossed herself and moaned:

"Lord, Lord!"

Kickin entered the room, waddling on tiptoe, wearing an overcoat and a peaked cap. His face, lit up by the lamp, looked like a lifeless bronze mask.

"What's happening?" shouted Bykov. "Where's Yakov?"

"He's gone"

"When did he go? Where did he go?"

The hunchback took off his cap spread out his crooked arms guiltily and said:

"I said to him, Yegor Ivanich, I said to him: keep out of it, keep out! Although it's quite true that they deceived us ..."

"Who?"

"The authorities. The government. And Yasha said: no, I must go! Our comrades..... Disgusting, he said. He's with Kononov's foundrymen . . . "

Bykov felt as if he had been lashed with a whip. Slipping his feet from the bed to the floor he shouted hoarsely:

"My gown! Take me to the window! Hey, woman!"

The nurse looked out of the window and said with a shrug of her shoulders:

"You can do as you like! A fire's started I'm going home!"

But she did not go. She did not even get up from the floor, but remained on her knees at the window.

Kickin helped Bykov to dress mumbling the while:

"I hope nothing comes flying through the window."

"Shut up!" said Bykov sternly. "You are in with them, I know."

The firing was close now. They could even hear a long drawn out cry:

"A-a-h!"

Then came the sound of bars being knocked off gates, of gates swinging open, of a tree being felled with a couple of axes, and a squeaky woman's voice was heard shouting in alarm:

"Run by the back gardens!"

Bykov shuffled up to the window and saw a black horse galloping down the street with a figure crouching in the saddle, which made the horse look like a camel. Judging by the uneven patter of its hoofs the horse was evidently lame. Three dark figures crept past in single file, hugging the fences and the walls of the houses. The last one was dragging a long pole, the free end of which was scraping the flagstones of the sidewalk and slipping over the curb.

"Thieves!" Bykov decided, feeling an ominous silence and hollowness growing inside him which echoed all the sounds he heard, and in which his thoughts were submerged and extinguished. A bullet flew past, rustling the dry leaves on the trees.

"Ricochet," commented Bykov, and then he heard Kickin's timid voice saying:

"You had better get away from the window!"

Bykov dug the hunchback in the shoulder and said:

"So it's a rebellion?"

"An uprising of the workers, Yegor Ivanich!"

"Is Yakov, Yashka, in this?"

"Yes, he's with Kononov's men"

"Go!" said Bykov, pointing through the window into the street "Go and call him! Tell him to come home at once! The rascal! Why did you keep quiet about it all this time?"

Kickin mumbled guiltily:

"Yasha told you Didn't he say there would be an armed revolution?"

"Go! If Yasha gets killed I'll make your life a misery!"

Bykov's chin was trembling so hard that it looked as though his beard would fall off. Drawn up, as if standing at attention, tall and grey, he stood in the grey patch of light from the window, with bulging eyes, chattering teeth and trembling legs, while his gown hung down in folds, as if it were flowing from his gaunt shoulders.

Kickin vanished.

"I'm going home," the nurse said again.

Keeping his eyes fixed on the street, which was now blotted out by a mist, Bykov sank heavily into his armchair. The firing had subsided to some extent, the sounds of axes were now rarer, something fell heavily against a fence, or a gate, and the sound of crashing timber was heard. Bykov couldn't understand why the telegraph wires were so taut and vibrating. And then, with unnatural swiftness, muffled sounds were heard in the street, the pattering of feet, the crash of shattered wood and a familiar voice, high-pitched but hoarse, shouted:

"Take the gates down! There are barrels in the yard! Roll them out!"

"Those are the barrels in my yard," guessed Bykov.

Voices floated up from the street shouting:

"Fasten the wire to the lamppost! Pull it across the street. Cut the pole down..... My leg! Mind my leg, you devil!"

"That's Yashka's voice!" said Bykov aloud. "Yes, that's he!"

He didn't want to think of what Yakov was doing, but for all that, he leaned against the window sill and mumbled:

"He's protecting the house. He's not letting them in"

The nurse was scurrying from one corner of the room to another and wailing:

"Lord! Oh, Lord! Robbers are breaking in!"

"Sit down!" shouted Bykov. "Sit down, or I'll put this stick across your back! Be quiet!"

And taking up the broomstick with which he tapped at the ceiling when calling Kickin, he brandished it at the nurse. His chin was still trembling, his moustache got into his mouth. He plucked at his moustache and beard, and his chin would not remain still. The silence within him became more and more sinister, and deeper became the hollowness which echoed the noise of the street, the shouts, the crash of shattered timber and the sounds of distant firing.

"Put it up on its end!" commanded a bass voice at the gate.

Day was already breaking and the figures of people could now be discerned fairly distinctly in the mist. There were no more than a hundred of them, crowding to the left of Bykov's house and filling the street in which they were building a barricade of telegraph poles, dragging them by the wires like the antennae of a sheatfish. They hauled bales of hay from the neighbouring yards; they dragged out a cart, and with shouts of mutual encouragement were pulling down a fence. The windows of the silent houses watched this fuss and bustle with a blind and glassy stare, and now and again the shadows of people appeared at the windows, only to vanish again.

In the distance a bugle shrilly sounded the "fall in!"

"Look out!" shouted the bass voice. Then came a crashing and scraping, and something collapsed upon the flags of the sidewalk.

"They're wrecking the place," said Bykov aloud, turning to the nurse, as if asking for her advice. "Do you hear? They're smashing everything up!"

Trembling with cold, he pulled his gown over his chest, poked his head still further out of the window, and saw Yakov running to the gates with a long crowbar on his shoulder. He was followed by about a dozen other men armed with rifles and axes, and one with a shaft from a

cart. They flung themselves at the gate like one man. Yakov sprang into the yard like a cat and shouted:

“Take the gates down! Take the barrels!”

It was all as improbable as a dream. Bykov looked, but could not believe his eyes. It was the hysterical screech of the nurse that brought him to his senses:

“Robbers! Robbers!”

The gates swung open and the men rushed into the yard.

“Stop!” shouted Bykov, mustering all his remaining strength for the effort. “Stop, you devils! Yashka—chase them out!”

He saw Yakov raise his face, as round as a pancake, up to him and heard him shout:

“They deceived us, uncle! They are killing the people!”

And then he heard the plaintive voice of the hunchback:

“Yegor Ivanich—stand back from the window!”

The left leaf of the gate rose up, swayed and fell with a crash into the courtyard. The men rushed at it and dragged it into the street, while others began to tear down the second leaf and roll out the barrels. Among them was the little hunchback.

Bykov, swearing like a trooper, picked up a flower pot with a cactus plant and hurled it into the yard at the men, but it flew wide. Bykov saw this and yelled at the nurse:

“Give me the flower pots, the chairs, everything!”

His voice sounded frightful. The woman, bent double, silently rushed about the room, carrying flower pots from the window sills and dragging chairs to the window by the arms and legs, while Bykov, swaying, mustering all his remaining strength and groaning with pain, hurled at the men everything he could lift, gasping and swearing savagely all the time.

“Yashka! I’ll kill you! Koska! You bloody cripple!”

A shot was fired, the tinkle of glass was heard, plaster dribbled from the ceiling, and the nurse, uttering a shriek, sat down on the floor and supported herself with her arms. Bykov turned round to her and yelled:

“None of that! You’re not killed! Bringing some more things up, you bitch!”

Several simultaneous shots were heard in the street, quite close, and somebody at the gates cried out in a shrill voice: "We're out-flanked!"

Bykov saw his nephew drop and crawl across the yard, dragging one leg, while a bearded fellow dropped the shaft he was carrying and fell on his back on the ground, knocking his head so hard that his cap fell off. At that moment grey-clad soldiers appeared at the gate out of the mist, bending low, carrying their rifles at the ready with their bayonets thrust forward.

"Surrender! Lie down!" they shouted.

Shots were fired at the fugitives.

Bykov laughed like mad. Extending his arm and pointing down into the street he yelled hoarsely, stamping his feet.

"Stab that one! The one that is crawling, wearing a hat! Stab him! And there's the hunchback, hiding behind the barrel, the hunchback!"

The nurse opened another window and also began to shriek:

"Stab them! . Stab them! Chase them away ."



TWENTY-SIX MEN AND A GIRL

We were twenty-six men, twenty-six living machines cooped up in a dark hole of a basement where from morn till night we kneaded dough, making pretzels and cracknels. The windows of our basement faced a sunken area lined with bricks that were green with slime; the windows outside were encased in a close-set iron grating, and no ray of sunshine could reach us through the panes which were covered with meal. Our boss had fenced the windows off to prevent any of his bread going to beggars or to those of our comrades who were out of work and starving—our boss called us a bunch of rogues and gave us tainted tripe for dinner instead of meat

Stuffy and crowded was life in that stony dungeon beneath a low-hanging ceiling covered by soot and cobwebs. Life was hard and sickening within those thick walls smeared with dirt stains and mildew We got up at five in the morning, heavy with lack of sleep, and at six, dull and listless, we sat down to the table to make pretzels and cracknels out of the dough our comrades had prepared while we were sleeping. And all day long, from morning till ten o'clock at night some of us sat at the table kneading the stiff dough and swaying the body to fight numbness, while others were mixing flour and water. And all day long the simmering water in the cauldron where the pretzels were cooking gurgled pensively and sadly, and baker's shovel clattered angrily and swiftly on the hearth-stone, throwing slippery cooked pieces of dough onto the hot bricks. From morning till night the wood burned at one end of the oven, and the ruddy glow of the flames flickered on the bakery walls, as though grinning at us. The huge oven resembled the ugly head of some fantastic monster thrust up from under the floor, its wide-open jaws ablaze

with glowing fire breathing incandescent flames and heat at us, and watching our ceaseless toil through two sunken air-holes over its forehead. These two hollows were like eyes—the pitiless impassive eyes of a monster; they looked at us with an invariable dark scowl, as though weary with looking at slaves of whom nothing human could be expected, and whom they despised with the cold contempt of wisdom.

Day in, day out, amid the meal dust and the grime that we brought in on our feet from the yard, in the smelly stuffiness of the hot basement, we kneaded the dough and made pretzels which were sprinkled with our sweat, and we hated our work with a fierce hatred, and never ate what our hands had made, preferring black rye bread to pretzels. Sitting at a long table facing one another—nine men on each side—our hands and fingers worked mechanically through the long hours, and we had grown so accustomed to our work that we no longer watched our movements. And we had grown so accustomed to one another that each of us knew every furrow on his comrades' faces. We had nothing to talk about, we were used to that, and were silent all the time—unless we swore, for there is always something one can swear at a man for, especially one's comrade. But we rarely swore at each other—is a man to blame if he is half-dead, if he is like a stone image, if all his senses are blunted by the crushing burden of toil? Silence is awful and painful only for those who have said all there is to say; but to people whose words are still unspoken, silence is simple and easy. . . . Sometimes we sang, and this is how our song would begin: during the work somebody would suddenly heave a deep sigh, like a weary horse, and begin softly to sing one of those long-drawn songs whose mournfully tender melody always lighten the heavy burden of the singer's heart. One of the men would sing while we listened in silence to the lonely song, and it would fade and die away beneath the oppressive basement ceiling like the languishing flames of a campfire in the steppe on a wet autumn night, when the grey sky hangs over the earth like a roof of lead. Then another singer would join the first,

and two voices would float drearily and softly in the stuffy heat of our crowded pen. And then suddenly several voices at once would take up the song—it would be lashed up like a wave, grow stronger and louder, and seem to break open the damp, heavy walls of our stony prison.

All the twenty-six are singing; loud voices, brought to harmony by long practice, fill the workshop; the song is cramped for room; it breaks against the stone walls, moaning and weeping, and stirs the heart with a gentle prickly pain, reopening old wounds and wakening anguish in the soul. . . . The singers draw deep and heavy sighs: one will suddenly break off and sit listening for a long time to his comrades singing, then his voice will mingle again in the general chorus. Another will cry out dismally: "Ach!" singing with closed eyes, and maybe, he sees the broad torrent of sound as a road leading far away, a wide road lit up by the brilliant sun, and he himself walking along it

The flames in the oven still flicker, the baker's shovel still scrapes on the brick, the water in the cauldron still bubbles and gurgles, the firelight on the wall still flutters in silent laughter..... And we chant out, through words not our own, the dull ache within us, the gnawing grief of living men deprived of the sun, the grief of slaves. And so we lived, twenty-six men, in the basement of a big stone house, and so hard was our life, that it seemed as though the three storeys of the house were built on our shoulders

Besides our songs there was something else that we loved and cherished, something that perhaps filled the place of the sun for us. On the second floor of our house there was a gold embroidery workshop, and there, among many girl hands, lived sixteen-year old Tanya, a housemaid. Every morning a little pink face with blue merry eyes would be pressed to the pane of the little window cut into the door of our workshop leading into the passage, and a sweet ringing voice would call out to us:

"Jail-birdies! Give me some pretzels!"

We would all turn our heads to the sound of that clear voice and look kindly and joyfully at the pure girlish face

that smiled at us so sweetly We liked to see the nose squashed against the glass, the little white teeth glistening from under rosy lips parted in a smile. We would rush to open the door for her, jostling each other, and there she would be, so winsome and sunny, holding out her apron, standing before us with her little head slightly tilted, and her face all wreathed in smiles A thick long braid of chestnut hair hung over her shoulder on her breast. We grimy, ignorant, ugly men look up at her—the threshold rises four steps above the floor—look up at her with raised heads and wish her good morning, and our words of greeting are special words, found only for her. When we speak to her our voices are softer, our joking lighter. Everything we have for her is special The baker draws out of the oven a shovelful of the crustiest browned pretzels and shoots them adroitly into Tanya's apron.

"Mind the boss doesn't catch you!" we warn her. She laughs roguishly and cries merrily: "Good-bye jail-birdies!" and vanishes in a twinkling like a little mouse.

And that is all . . . But long after she has gone we talk about her—we say the same things we said the day before and earlier, because she, and we, and everything around us are the same they were the day before and earlier... . It is very painful and hard when a man lives, and nothing around him changes, and if it doesn't kill the soul in him, the longer he lives the more painful does the immobility of things surrounding him become . . . We always talked of women a way that sometimes made us feel disgusted with ourselves and our coarse shameless talk That is not surprising, since the women we knew did not probably deserve to be talked of in any other way. But of Tanya we never said a bad word; no one of us ever dared to touch her with his hand and she never heard a loose joke from any of us. Perhaps it was because she never stayed long—she would flash before our gaze like a star falling from the heavens and vanish Or perhaps it was because she was small and so very beautiful, and everything that is beautiful in-

spires respect, even with rough men. Moreover, though hard labour was turning us into dumb oxen, we were only human beings, and like all human beings, could not live without an object of worship. Finer than she there was nobody about us, and nobody else paid attention to us men living in the basement—though there were dozens of tenants in the house. And finally—probably chiefly—we regarded her as something that belonged to us, something that existed thanks only to our pretzels: we made it our duty to give her hot pretzels, and this became our daily sacrifice to the idol, almost a holy rite, that endeared her to us ever more from day to day. Besides pretzels we gave Tanya a good deal of advice—to dress warmly, not to run quickly upstairs, not to carry heavy bundles of firewood. She listened to our counsels with a smile, retorted with a laugh and never obeyed them, but we did not take offence—we were satisfied to show our solicitude for her.

Often she asked us to do things for her. She would, for instance, ask us to open a refractory door in the cellar or chop some wood, and we would gladly and with a peculiar pride do these things for her and anything else she asked.

But when one of us asked her to mend his only shirt, she sniffed scornfully and said:

“Catch me! Not likely!”

We enjoyed a good laugh at the silly fellow's expense, and never again asked her to do anything. We loved her—and there all is said. A man always wants to foist his love on somebody or other, though it frequently oppresses, sometimes sullies, and his love may poison the life of a fellow creature, for in loving he does not respect the object of his love. We had to love Tanya, for there was no one else we could love.

At times one of us would suddenly begin to argue something like this:

“What's the idea of making such a fuss over the kid? What's there so remarkable about her anyway?”

We'd soon brusquely silence the fellow who spoke like that—we had to have something we could love: we found it,

and loved it, and what we twenty-six loved stood for each of us, it was our holy of holies, and anybody who went against us in this matter was our enemy. We love, perhaps, what is not really good, but then there are twenty-six of us, and we therefore want the object of our adoration to be held sacred by others.

Our love is no less onerous than hate .. and, perhaps, that is why some stiff-necked people claim that our hate is more flattering than love. . But why do they not shun us if that is so ?

In addition to the pretzel bakehouse our boss had a bun bakery. It was situated in the same house, and only a wall divided it from our hole. The bun bakers, however, of whom there were four, held themselves aloof from us, considered their work cleaner than ours, and themselves, therefore, better men; they never visited our workshop, and treated us with mocking scorn whenever they met us in the yard. Neither did we visit them—the boss banned such visits for fear we would steal buns. We did not like the bun bakers, because we envied them—their work was easier than ours, they got better wages, they were fed better, they had a roomy, airy workshop, and they were all so clean and healthy, and hence so odious. We, on the other hand, were all a yellow greyfaced lot; three of us were ill with syphilis, some were scabby, and one was crippled by rheumatism. On holidays and off-days they used to dress up in suits and creaking high boots, two of them possessed accordions, and all used to go out for a stroll in the park, whilst we were dressed in filthy tatters, with rags or bast shoes on our feet, and the police wouldn't let us into the park—now, could we love the bun bakers?

And one day we learned that their chief baker had taken to drink, that the boss had dismissed him and taken on another in his place, and that the new man was an ex-soldier who went about in a satin waistcoat and had a watch on a gold chain. We were curious to have a look at that dandy, and every now and then one of us would run out into the yard in this hope of seeing him.

But he came to our workshop himself. Kicking open the door he stood in the doorway, smiling, and said to us: "Hullo! How do you do, boys!"

The frosty air rushing through the door in a smoky cloud eddied round his feet, while he stood in the doorway looking down at us, his large yellow teeth flashing from under his fair swaggering moustache. His waistcoat was indeed unique—a blue affair, embroidered with flowers, and all glittering, with buttons made of some kind of red stone. The chain was there too....

He was a handsome fellow, was that soldier—tall, strong, with ruddy cheeks and big light eyes that had a nice look in them—a kind, clean look. On his head he wore a white stiffly starched cap, and from under an immaculately clean apron peeped the pointed toes of a highly polished pair of fashionable boots.

Our chief baker politely asked him to close the door. He complied unhurriedly and began questioning us about the boss. We fell over each other telling him that the boss was a skinflint, a crook, a scoundrel and a tormentor—we told him everything there was to tell about the boss that couldn't be put in writing here. The soldier listened, twitching his moustache and regarding us with that gentle, clear look of his.

"You've a lot of girls around here...." he said suddenly.

Some of us laughed politely, others pulled sugary faces, and some one informed the soldier that there were nine bits in the place.

"Use 'em?" asked the soldier with a knowing wink

Again we laughed, a rather subdued, embarrassed laugh..... Many of us would have liked to make the soldier believe they were as gay lads as he was, but they couldn't do it, none of us could do it. Somebody confessed as much, saying quietly:

"How comes we....."

"M'yes, you're a long way off!" said the soldier convincedly, subjecting us to a close scrutiny. "You're not.. er, up to the mark.. ... Ain't got the character..... the proper.

shape . . . you know, looks! Looks is what a woman likes about a man! Give her a regular body . . . everything just so! Then of course she likes a bit of muscle . Likes an arm to be an arm, here's the stuff!"

The soldier pulled his right hand out of his pocket, with the sleeve rolled back to the elbow, and held it up for us to see. He had a strong, white arm covered with shining golden hair.

"The leg, the chest—everything must be firm . . . And then a man's got to be properly dressed in shipshape form . Now, the women just fall for me. Mind you, I don't call 'em or tempt 'em—they hang about my neck five at a time "

He sat down on a sack of flour and spent a long time in telling us how the women loved him and how dashing he treated them. Then he took his leave, and when the door closed behind him with a squeak, we sat on in a long silence, meditating over him and his stories. Then suddenly everybody spoke up at once, and it transpired that we had all taken a liking to him. Such a simple, nice fellow, the way he came in, sat down, and chatted. Nobody ever came to see us, nobody talked to us like that, in a friendly way. And we kept on talking about him and his future success with the seamstresses, who, on meeting us in the yard, either steered clear of us with lips offensively pursed, or bore straight down on us as though we did not stand in their path at all. And we only admired them, in the yard or when they passed our windows, dressed in cute little caps and fur coats in the winter, and in flowery hats with bright coloured parasols in the summer. But among ourselves we spoke of these girls in a way that, had they heard us, would have made them mad with shame and insult.

"I hope he doesn't spoil little Tanya!" said the chief baker suddenly in a tone of anxiety.

We were all struck dumb by this statement. We had somehow forgotten Tanya—the soldier seemed to have blotted her out with his large, handsome figure. Then a noisy argument broke out: some said that Tanya would not stand for it, some asserted that she would be unable to resist

the soldier's charms, and others proposed to break the fellow's bones in the event of him making love to Tanya. Finally, all decided to keep a watch on the soldier and Tanya, and warn the kid to beware of him... . That put a stop to the argument

About a month passed. The soldier baked buns, went out with the seamstresses, frequently dropped in to see us, but never said anything about his victories—all he did was to turn up his moustache and lick his chops.

Tanya came every morning for her pretzels and was invariably gay, sweet and gentle. We tried to broach the subject of the soldier with her—she called him “a pop-eyed dummy” and other funny names and that set our minds at rest. We were proud of our little girl when we saw how the seamstresses clung to the soldier. Tanya's attitude towards him bucked us all up, and under her influence as it were, we ourselves began to evince towards him an attitude of scorn. We loved her more than ever, and greeted her more gladly and kindly in the mornings.

One day, however, the soldier dropped in on us a little the worse for drink, sat down and began to laugh, and when we asked him what he was laughing at, he explained:

“Two of them have had a fight over me... . Lida and Grusha..... You should have seen what they did to each other! A regular scream, ha-ha! One of 'em grabbed the other by the hair, dragged her all over the floor into the passage, then got on top of her . ha-ha-ha! Scratched each other's mugs, tore their clothes . . . Wasn't that funny! Now, why can't these females have a straight fight? Why do they scratch, eh?”

He sat on a bench, looking so clean and healthy and cheerful, laughing without a stop. We said nothing. Somehow he was odious to us this time

“Why am I such a lucky devil with the girls? It's a scream! Why, I just wink my eye and the trick's done!”

He raised his white hands covered with glossy hairs and brought them down on his knees with a slap. He surveyed us with a look of pleased surprise, as though himself

genuinely astonished at the lucky turn of his affairs with the ladies His plump ruddy physiognomy shone with smug pleasure and he repeatedly passed his tongue over his lips

Our chief baker angrily rattled his shovel on the hearth and suddenly said sarcastically :

"It's no great fun felling little fir trees—I'd like to see what you'd do with a pine!"

"Eh, what? Were you talking to me?" asked the soldier.

"Yes, you .. ."

"What did you say?"

"Never mind. Let it lay . . ."

"Here, hold on! What's it all about! What d'you mean —pine?"

Our baker did not reply His shovel moved swiftly in the oven, tossing in boiled pretzels and discharging the baked ones noisily onto the floor where boys sat threading them on bast strings. He seemed to have forgotten the soldier. But the latter suddenly got excited He rose to his feet and stepped up to the oven, exposing himself to the imminent danger of being struck in the chest by the shovel handle that whisked spasmodically in the air.

"Now, look here—who d'you mean? That's an insult .. Why, there ain't a girl that could resist me! No fear! And here are you, hinting things against me .. ."

Indeed, he appeared to be genuinely offended. Evidently the only source of his self-respect was his ability to seduce women; perhaps this ability was the only living attribute he could boast, the only thing that made him feel a human being

There are some people for whom life holds nothing better or higher than a malady of the soul or flesh They cherish it through-out life, and it is the sole spring of life to them While suffering from it they nourish themselves on it. They complain about it to people and in this manner command the interest of their neighbours They exact toll of sympathy from people, and this is the only thing in life they have. Deprive them of that malady, cure them of

it, and they will be utterly miserable, because they will lose the sole sustenance of their life and become empty husks. Sometimes a man's life is so poor that he is perforce obliged to cultivate a vice and thrive on it. One might say that people are often addicted to vice through sheer boredom.

The soldier was stung to the quick. He bore down on our baker, whining:

"No, you tell me—who is it?"

"Shall I tell you?" said the baker, turning on him suddenly.

"Well?"

"D'you know Tanya?"

"Well?"

"Well, there you are! See what you can do there . . ."

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

"Her? Easier'n spitting!"

"We'll see!"

"You'll see! Ha-a!"

"Why, she'll....."

"It won't take a month!"

"You're cocky, soldier, ain't you?"

"A fortnight! I'll show you! Who did you say?" Tanya? Pshaw!"

"Come on, get out, you're in the way!"

"A fortnight, and the trick's done! Oh, you! ..."

"Get out!"

The baker suddenly flew into a rage and brandished his shovel. The soldier fell back in amazement, then regarded us all for a while in silence, muttered grimly "All right!" and went out.

All through this argument we had kept out peace, our interest having been engaged in the conversation. But when the soldier left we all broke out into loud and animated speech.

Somebody cried out to the baker:

"That's a bad business you've started, Pavel!"

"Get on with your work!" snapped the baker

We realized that the soldier had been put on his high ropes and that Tanya was in danger. Yet, while realizing this, we were all gripped by a tense but thrilling curiosity as to what would be the outcome of it. Would Tanya hold her own against the soldier? We almost unanimously voiced the conviction:

"Tanya? She'll hold her ground! She ain't easy prey!"

We were terribly keen on testing our idol; we assiduously tried to convince each other that our idol was a staunch idol and would come out on top in this engagement. We ended up by expressing our doubts as to whether we had sufficiently goaded the soldier, fearing that he would forget the wager and that we would have to prick his conceit some more. Henceforth a new exciting interest had come into our lives, something we had never known before. We argued among ourselves for days on end; we all somehow seemed to have grown cleverer, spoke better and more. It seemed as though we were playing a sort of game with the devil, and the stake on our side was Tanya. And when we had learned from the bun bakers that the soldier had started to "make a dead set for Tanya" our excitement rose to such a furious pitch and life became such a thrilling experience for us that we did not even notice how the boss had taken advantage of our wrought up feelings to throw in extra work by raising the daily knead to fourteen pounds of dough. We did not even seem to tire of the work. Tanya's name was all day long on our lips. And we awaited her morning visits with a peculiar impatience. At times we fancied that when she came in to see us it would be a different Tanya, not the one we always knew.

We told her nothing, however, about the wager. We never asked her any questions and treated her in the same good-natured loving way. But something new had crept into our attitude, something that was alien to our former feelings for Tanya—and that new element was keen curiosity, keen and cold like a blade of steel ..

"Boys! Time's up today!" said the baker one morning as he began work.

We were well aware of it without his reminder. Yet we all started

"You watch her She'll soon come in!" suggested the baker. Some one exclaimed in a tone of regret:

"It's not a thing the eye can catch!"

And again a lively noisy argument sprang up. Today, at length, we would know how clean and uncontaminated was the vessel in which we had laid all the treasure that we possessed. That morning we suddenly realized for the first time that we were gambling for high stakes, that this test of our idol might destroy it for us altogether. All these days we had been hearing that the soldier was doggedly pursuing Tanya with his attentions, but for some reason none of us asked her what her attitude was towards him. She continued regularly to call on us every morning for her pretzels and was always her usual self.

On that day, too, we soon heard her voice:

"Jail-birdies! I've come... ."

We hastened to let her in, and when she came in we greeted her, contrary to our custom, with silence. We looked hard at her and were at a loss what to say to her, what to ask her. We stood before her in a silent sullen crowd. She was obviously surprised at the unusual reception, and suddenly we saw her turn pale, look anxious and stir restlessly. Then in a choky voice she asked:

"Why are you all so ... strange!"

"What about you?" threw in the baker in a grim tone, his eyes fixed on her face.

"What about me?"

"Nothing.... ."

"Well, give me the pretzels, quick. ..."

"Plenty of time!" retorted the baker without stirring, his eyes still glued on her face

She suddenly turned and disappeared through the door.

The baker picked up his shovel, and turning to the oven, let fall calmly:

"Well—she's fixed! The soldier's done it.... . the blighter!....."

We shambled back to the table like a herd of jostling sheep, sat down in silence and apathetically set to our work. Presently some one said:

"Maybe it isn't . . ."

"Shut up! Enough of that!" shouted the baker

We all knew him for a clever man, cleverer than any of us. And that shout of his we understood as meaning that he was convinced of the soldier's victory.... We felt sad and perturbed ...

At twelve o'clock—the lunch hour—the soldier came in. He was, as always, clean and spruce and—as always—looked us straight in the eyes. We felt too ill at ease to look at him.

"Well, my dear sirs, d'you want me to show you what a soldier can do?" he said with a proud sneer. "You go out into the passage and peep through the cracks... get me?"

We trooped into the passage, and tumbling over each other, pressed our faces to the chinks in the wooden wall looking onto the yard. We did not have to wait long. Soon Tanya came through the yard with a hurried step and anxious look, skipping over puddles of thawed snow and mud. She disappeared through the door of the cellar. Presently the soldier sauntered past whistling, and he went in too. His hands were thrust into his pockets and he twitched his moustache.....

It was raining and we saw the drops falling into the puddles which puckered up at the impacts. It was a grey wet day—a very bleak day. Snow still lay on the roofs, while on the ground dark patches of slush stood out here and there. On the roofs too the snow was covered with a brownish coating of dirt. It was cold and disagreeable, waiting in that passage

The first to come out of the cellar was the soldier. He walked leisurely across the yard, twitching his moustache, his hands deep in his pockets—much the same he always was

Then Tanya came out. Her eyes... ... her eyes with joy and happiness, and her lips smiled. And she walked as though in a dream, swaying, with uncertain gait. . . .

It was more than we could endure. We all made a sudden rush for the door, burst into the yard and began yelling and whistling at her in a fierce, loud, savage uproar.

She started when she saw us and stood stock-still, her feet in a dirty puddle. We surrounded her and cursed her with a sort of malicious glee in a torrent of profanity and shameless taunts

We did it unhurriedly, quietly, seeing that she had no way of escape from the circle around her and that we could jeer at her to our heart's content. It is strange, but we did not hit her. She stood amid us and turned her head from side to side, listening to our insults. And we ever more fiercely, ever more furiously, flung at her the dirt and poison of our wrath

Her face drained of life. Her blue eyes, which the moment before had looked so happy, were dilated, her breath came in gasps and her lips quivered.

And we, having surrounded her, were wreaking our vengeance on her—for had she not robbed us? She had belonged to us, we had spent our best sentiments on her, and though that best was a mere beggar's pittance, we were twenty-six and she was one, and there was no anguish we could inflict that was fit to meet her guilt! How we insulted her!... . She said not a word, but simply gazed at us with a look of sheer terror and a long shudder went through her body

We guffawed, we howled, we snarled Other people joined us. One of us pulled the sleeve of Tanya's blouse... .

Suddenly her eyes blazed; she raised her hands in a slow gesture to put her hair straight, and said loudly but calmly, straight into our faces:

Oh, you miserable jail-birds!"

And she bore straight down on us, just as if we had not

been there, had not stood in her path. Indeed, that is why none of us proved to be in her path.

When she was clear of our circle she added just as loudly without turning round, in a tone of scorn and pride:

"Oh, you filthy swine . . . You beasts . . ." and she departed straight, beautiful, and proud.

We were left standing in the middle of the yard amid the mud, under the rain and a grey sky that had no sun in it . . .

Then we too shuffled back to our damp stony dungeon as of old, the sun never peered through our window, and Tanya came never more!

